

A Sermon for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Lindsey Chapel, Emmanuel Church, Boston  
The Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates, Bishop XVI of Massachusetts  
Saturday, September 28, 2024

## Stories Told in Wood, Stone, and Glass

The *Sunday Boston Globe* on September 28, 1924, had the following headline: “CHOICE BIT OF CHURCH ARCHITECTURE TO BE CONSECRATED IN BOSTON THIS WEEK.” The article, under the byline of one A.J. Philpott, began: “The Leslie Lindsey Memorial, undoubtedly one of the most beautiful bits of architecture in America, will be consecrated with the solemn rites of the Episcopal Church Wednesday next in the forenoon.”

So here we are to mark the hundredth anniversary of this “choice bit of church architecture;” to give thanks for those in whose hearts was placed the desire and skill to create such a stunning sacred space for their day and ours; and to ask God’s Spirit to continue to dwell here with creativity, constancy, and power.

I expect it can be said of any space – sacred or secular – that it has its tales to tell. Somehow when one enters this chapel, the perception of layer upon layer of story is so palpable, so dense and weighty, as to be almost overwhelming. There is nowhere to sit, stand, or look, that does not reach out to communicate with us, whether by symbol or history, art or music, sight or sound.

There is, firstly, the story told in the Chapel’s *architecture* – in its wood and glass and stone. In its rough exterior complementarity of Roxbury puddingstone and Indiana limestone; in its warm interior of Bath stone from England, and gleaming marble from Italy; its seven equal bays; its tracery arches and cross-vault ceiling; its carvings of rich oak. In the symbols and mystical emblems beyond number: flowers and fruits; doves and pelicans; serpents and lions; angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven! Every one of these points to some part of our salvation story – to creation, sacrifice; to courage and cowardice, to brokenness and wholeness; to compassion, and nourishment and redemption and resurrection. It would take us forever to read all these signs. Here the architecture tells its stories.

Then, secondly, there is the story told in the chapel’s *origins*. As you’ve already known or read in Pam’s notes, this chapel was conceived and built as a memorial to Leslie Lindsey, the gift of her parents. Leslie Lindsey and her husband Stuart Mason were married here at Emmanuel, set off on their honeymoon, and died in the disastrous sinking of the Cunard ocean liner *Lusitania*. As Pam notes, the link between the ship’s sinking and weapons of war, for a father engaged in munitions production, must surely have created a complex moral calculus.

Given its memorial history, this space narrates grief more prominently and powerfully than most. There are faces of the lost bride and groom placed strategically in stained glass. There is the prominence of martyrs like Bartholomew and Stephen. There is the overwhelming presence of

Marian imagery: the Heart pierced by Seven Swords; the Via Dolorosa, where the mother meets her son bearing the cross; the Pieta, in which she mourns her child. The resurrection is, to be sure, everywhere to be seen: a pelican with her young; the empty cross; a risen sun. But the grief endured before resurrection comes is keen in this place. Here the memorial origin of this place tells its story.

Then, thirdly, there are narratives swirling around the church's *wider design*. It's an addition onto a Back Bay church the architecture of which, like others nearby, represents Boston's firm departure from its Puritan roots. There's the very rich and prominent devotion to Mary represented throughout, in a parish which was not self-consciously Anglo-Catholic yet gave the Holy Mother a prominence not displayed by the Prayer Book of its day, which still maintained a strict avoidance of Marian piety. So the movement from insistently reformed Protestantism to a reclaimed catholic universality is another narrative here. Here the historical context tells a story.

And then – oh, thanks be to God – then all the *events and activities* that have transpired within these walls also have stories to tell! It is my firm belief that though we say a prayer of dedication when we bless a new chalice or baptismal vessel to mark its sacramental purpose, it is actually the vessel's subsequent use which makes it sacred. It is every new life declared at that font, every hand that reaches for that chalice, every grief or joy that is brought to the railing, every starving soul nourished by that sacrament – it is those things, even more than a dedicatory prayer, which consecrate those sacred vessels.

So it is with this sacred space. Prayers of consecration were said a hundred years ago. But in the intervening years it is the aching hearts, the shouts of joy, the tears of sorrow, the prayers spoken and those too deep for words, all that has arisen from this place — all of that has made it deeply sacred. Those baptisms, weddings, and funerals; those healing services and rites of reconciliation; those sacred anthems sung; that J.S. Bach, plainsong, and Arvo Pärt; the staging of choir processions, clergy processions, puppet processions; all of that and more has burnished this place into the fullness of its holiness.

I have a memory of my own — gathering here in Advent with children and their teachers while the liturgy got underway next door, teaching them about the symbolism of the bishop's crozier by handing out candy canes, doubtless to the parents' distress. The prayers and worship here tell more stories.

All that, and one other thing: the ways in which this space has advanced the *apostolic mission* of this church. You know that Ecclesia ministries has held its common art program here; that Boston Warm has provided shelter for unhoused persons here; that 12-step programs have met here. I suspect that those who designed, constructed, and dedicated this chapel a hundred years ago would never have imagined any of these things happening in this space. Much less would they have envisioned the Central Reform Temple holding Shabbat services and other events in this space, for twenty some years and counting! All these stories.

From tonight's First Reading, in the First Book of Kings [8:22-30] King Solomon prayed:

*The heavens ... cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! Yet give attention to your servant's prayer, Lord my God. ... May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there.'*

God's name is here — steadily, creatively, faithfully — and thus have God's people been heard, known, and blessed. And from tonight's Second Reading, in Paul's Letter to the church at Ephesus [2:13-22]:

*For [Christ Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made ... two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... to create in himself one new humanity out of two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God.*

Here then is the through-line. If, as we have said, this space is dense with narrative — story upon story from its century of service — well then, I suggest that the story of breaking down dividing walls is the through-line, the overarching consistency in all these stories.

- In its memorial origins, it was a bridge between past tragic loss and future redemption.
- In its architecture, it brought disparate elements into harmony.
- In its refinement, it furthered Boston's progression from Puritan austerity to artistic flourishing.
- In its Marian emphasis, it broke down divisions between pieties Catholic and Reformed.
- In its advancement of Ecclesia and Boston Warm, it breaks down binary notions of who is serving and who is served.

And in playing a role in the remarkable collaboration between Emmanuel Church and the Central Reform Temple, it goes right to the heart of Paul's narrative, destroying the dividing wall of hostility between peoples of God, between the trunk and the grafted branch.

Hear, o friends, all these stories! Gaze upon their tokens, breathe in the spirit of their reconciling goodness, and their apostolic urgings. And give thanks. Then, in the words of Bishop Slattery in his consecration sermon a hundred years ago [*Boston Globe*, 10/1/1924]:

*[T]ell future generations ... how, once upon a time, God put it into the hearts of [God's] servants to worship [God] in the beauty of holiness; [that] these generations to come [would] be filled with inspiration ... [and] be a living response to the silent versicle of that beauty of holiness which is about and around and above them as they pray.*

May we be strengthened in this place to be that “living response to the silent versicle of the beauty of holiness!”