

**3 Easter  
April 15, 2018  
The Rev. Father Peter Williams Cassey**

**In the name of the God of all Creation  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

**The Collect of the Rev. Fr. Peter Williams Cassey**

O God, by whose grace your servant Peter Williams Cassey, kindled with the flame of your love, became a burning and shining light to countless people across the land living at the margins of society and the Church: Grant that we, remembering his commitment to be set aside for your purpose among children, youth, slaves and free striving for justice among all people, may be aflame with the spirit of love and discipline, and walk before you as children of life and freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Every so often visitors to St. Augustine ... or sometimes residents of the area who have not been to Lincolntonville ... ask to see the interior of the church. Almost always they comment on this quintessential sacred space and speak of its simple beauty ... the vaulted ceiling, the wood paneling, the beautiful window above the altar. This church was built and consecrated 118 years ago on April 5, 1900 ... when the Rev. Fr. Peter Williams Cassey was the Vicar, and the Rt. Rev. Edwin Gardner Weed was Bishop of the Diocese of Florida ... the first Bishop of Florida I might add. Bishop Weed's great, great grandson, Jody Weed, and his wife Suzanne and their two children are members of St. Cyprian's. We don't see them often ... teenage children ... but Suzanne is Chris Mason's daughter.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for those persons who made up the congregation then to move into this wonderful space? This wood would have a fresh look to it. There would have been the lingering odor of whatever finish was applied to the paneling, and the people would have admired the fine "Carpenter Gothic" architecture inside and out. That congregation would also be celebrating the fact that they now had a permanent home ... one with both stature and grace ... a cornerstone in the Lincolntonville neighborhood. (Our local historian, David Nolan, recently sent me a picture of a building on Spanish Street where the congregation worshipped before moving here. The building is now a bar.)

The Rev. Fr. Peter Williams Cassey served St. Cyprian's as its first fulltime Vicar from 1901 until his death on April 16, 1917. However, he had been with the congregation on a part time basis for several years before becoming Vicar. No doubt, Fr. Cassey was a primary force that led to the building of this sanctuary, and it would have been confidence and trust in his leadership that allowed others to invest in this dream.

Remember, this was just 35 years after the end of the Civil War, and it was a time where Jim Crowism was rampant in the South. With an Episcopal church for white people on the Plaza downtown, the African Americans now had their own church in their village neighborhood of Lincolntown. But, clearly it was an “us” and “them” world that had to be navigated carefully by those designated as “them.”

Fr. Cassey obviously navigated those waters very well. Bishop Edwin Gardner Weed said at Cassey’s funeral “that no other clergyman in the Diocese came close to the theological maturity and scholarship that Peter Williams Cassey exhibited in his ministry and teachings. We should be proud of these great souls that helped lay the foundations of this Diocese.” And from the St. Augustine Evening Record: “Father Cassey during the years of his most useful life, has pastored some of the leading [congregations] of [the Episcopal Church] in the Southland, and wherever he has labored he has left a most wholesome and uplifting influence, mingled with an ardent love and the reverential respect of all classes. This fact is no less true in his present charge. There is no ministry of the gospel throughout St. Augustine who is held in more honor and esteem among both white and colored than is Father Cassey. St. Cyprian is a greater church today because of him.”

I should note that the Jim Crow norm of segregation at the time also applied to the Episcopal Church in the South. Although Fr. Cassey was the first African American to be ordained west of the Mississippi, he was ordained a deacon. Because of the color of his skin he was never allowed to be ordained a priest.

Today we honor the legacy of Fr. Cassey ... he is commemorated on the date of his death, April 16 ... tomorrow. And we ... the people of this generation at St. Cyprian’s ... do so as a people of the Resurrection. In 2006, when a large contingent of parishioners left the Episcopal Church and St. Cyprian’s the congregation was all but dead. But the grave could not hold Jesus, and the grave could not hold the faithful remnant of St. Cyprian’s. Today we stand as a congregation resurrected ... resurrected to a life navigating the world of “us” and “them” just as Fr. Cassey did over a hundred years ago.

Let me turn now to the readings from Holy Scripture for this morning. The story we just heard from Luke’s gospel of the resurrected Jesus, and Peter’s speech at the Temple in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, tell us a lot about the early community ... before it was even identified as “Christian.” These followers of Jesus were faithful Jews. The disciples themselves were skeptical of this resurrection thing ... even the resurrected Jesus acknowledged their “doubts” in the reading we just heard. And in Acts we heard that Peter was on his way into the Temple for 3 o’clock prayers when he made his speech to the other Jews who had also come to pray. At the beginning of this chapter in Acts, as Peter is on his way to the Temple, he heals a lame man at the Temple gate, and then his speech speaks to the fulfillment of a prophecy by Moses. This speech ends with “All the families of the earth shall be blessed.” It was a quote from Genesis. It is the global promise that was first made to Abraham 4,000 years ago.

This story in Acts is about God's power, and Peter's faith in God's son, Jesus the Resurrected Christ, and how he could bring healing to a man who was lame. Peter's speech, which, by the way, got him arrested by the Temple authorities, was a call to his fellow Jews that this Jesus was indeed the Messiah predicted by Moses. However, the writer of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles was writing after the fall of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E. and it was a time of a lot of finger pointing. So, instead of being read as an inspiration to the gathered Jewish crowd, over the ages it has been interpreted as a polemic against the Jews because they killed Jesus. Later generations read this passage as a "Christian" Peter denouncing all Jews rather than a Jewish Peter condemning just a few specific of his fellow Jews from Jerusalem. This passage, along with others, has been used by the Christian Church to blame all Jews for the killing of Jesus, and has been a justification for horrific acts in the name of the Gospel of Christ.

We, the people of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church, claim to be inclusive offering a radical hospitality to all. However, not all Christian communities are inclusive, and it has not been the history of the Christian Church to always respect peoples of other faiths. Throughout the ages the Church has separated people into "us" and "them." During the Crusades the "us" were the Christians, and the "them" were the Muslims. During the Inquisition the "us" were the Christians and the "them" were the Jews and "infidels." During the Holocaust the "us" was the "Aryan Race," and the "them" were Jews, people of color, gays, the disabled and others. And all too often the justification for the "us" was Peter's speech and words from John's gospel that seemed to blame the "Jews" for the death of Jesus. The idea that Christianity is the one and only true religion has justified unimaginable horrors ... all in the name of a loving God. I believe there is another way to express a faithful Christianity.

Many of you have heard this before. The Rev. Loren Meade, an Episcopal priest who founded the Alban Institute in Washington, DC, was once addressing the House of Bishops on a retreat. This was a number of years ago when the bishops were struggling with the issue of the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the life and leadership of our Christian denomination. Meade said, "The world is divided into two kinds of people ... the kind of people who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those that don't." For two millennia the Church has been dividing the world into "us" and "them," "either/or." I believe it is time to stop dividing the peoples of the world and begin seeing our fellow human beings as children of the same God ... even if they call the Sacred by another name. Now is the time to look at the other ... regardless of where they live on this planet, or the color of their skin, or their sexual orientation ... and see the other as a brother or sister. Remember, our Baptismal Covenant calls us to "respect the dignity of every human being."

My personal faith is Christianity. It may not look like the same Christianity that some others claim, but I certainly believe it is Christianity ... it is my path to living as a beloved child of God ... taking seriously what Jesus took seriously ... and living a Resurrected life. I believe that many of you share a similar faith. However, this faith is not exclusive ... it still honors and respects other paths and the people who call the Sacred by other names. And it is inclusive ... it is a display of radical hospitality. Rather than separate and divide us by labels that foster animosity, prejudice and hatred, we have come to the place of embracing everyone as a blessed child of God. Final,

my faith is committed to compassion, and strives to treat all others on this planet in the way that I want to be treated ... recognizing and affirming their humanity and dignity.

The author of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles is the same one who wrote the Gospel of Luke. It is extremely doubtful that the author was present when Peter made his speech, and even more doubtful that there was a scribe there to take down every word that Peter spoke. It may have been a very inspiring piece of oratory, but unless it is put into the context of the era in which it was written it can become, and has already been used, as a justification for violence in the name of a loving God. I believe it is time to see all people on this planet ... and those of future generations ... as worthy of God's blessing and love. And our commitment to compassion drives us to always treat the other, wherever they may, and whoever they may be, in the same way that we would want to be treated.

One hundred one years ago tomorrow the Rev. Fr. Peter Williams Cassey died in his home at the south end of what is now Martin Luther King Avenue ... just a few blocks away from here. Before coming to St. Cyprian's Fr. Cassey had already made a substantial impact upon the Episcopal Church, and he is now commemorated in the Episcopal Church's calendar of Holy Women, Holy Men. He built a congregation and a church which we have inherited. In an "us" and "them" world he was able to transcend labels and see all others as fellow children of God. One hundred eighteen years after this church was consecrated it is now our turn ... a people of the Resurrection ... to continue to build upon his legacy.

Amen.