

SERMON 896

November 11, 2014

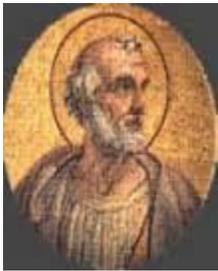
The Feast of Leo the Great

22nd Week after Pentecost

971st Week as Priest

798th Week at St Dunstan's

63rd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee



WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS NOW

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Leo was Bishop of Rome in the Fifth Century AD, toward the end of that period we call the Early Church. Leo was one of two popes to be named “Great,” and is considered to be one of the last of the Church Fathers. But what made Leo great?

During Leo’s lifetime, the Roman Empire was disintegrating from within. Destructive infighting among emperors and would-be emperors was continual. The Empire was stretched too far and too thin, the economy collapsed, and it divided east and west, with two centers—Constantinople and Rome. From without, the Empire was surrounded: Barbarians invaded from northern Europe and western Asia; the Muslims invaded from the south.

But in the midst of this chaos and warfare, Leo was strong and effective. He held the western Church together by will and wisdom; he negotiated with Attila the Hun and Vandal chieftains to save Rome; and he contributed mightily to the Christological work of the Council of Chalcedon. It's amazing what a good bishop can do when he puts his mind to it.

All of this is to say that we continue to need such good bishops to share in the leadership of the Church in our own day. Each bishop is called upon to guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church; to celebrate and to provide for the administration of the sacraments; to ordain priests and deacons; and to join in ordaining other bishops.

The Episcopal Church in the United States of America is at an important crossroads. Our 26th Presiding Bishop, the Most Reverend Doctor Katharine Jefferts Schori, is retiring from office, and a new presiding bishop will be elected in 2015. Let us hope and pray that this new leader will honor our heritage which is the faith of patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and all those of every generation who have looked to God in hope. Let us choose among the bishops one who will proclaim Christ's resurrection, interpret the Gospel, and testify to Christ's sovereignty as Lord of lords and King of kings.

As chief priest and pastor, each bishop of our Church promises to be faithful in prayer and diligent in the study of Holy Scripture. He or she pledges to enlighten the minds and stir up the conscience of their people. A bishop must be a wholesome example to all, showing compassion to the poor and to strangers, work for the spread of God's kingdom.

Since the 1950's our Episcopal Church has declined in membership from 5.5 million people to about 1.8 million. And over the last decade, we have experienced a 23 percent fall-off in Sunday attendance. Only 657,000 Episcopalians attend services on Sunday morning now. Sadly, there is a connection to be made between Leo's day and our own. "Things fall apart," said W.B. Yeats, "the center cannot hold."

Please understand: I am not blaming Katharine, Frank, Edmond, or any of the Presiding Bishops of the Episcopal Church since Henry St. George Tucker for the precipitous decline in our membership. But I am suggesting that we need to bring the love of Christ to many thousands of people, and we need to show them that they belong in the Episcopal Church.

What is needed for the Episcopal Church is a new leader who will "hold to the standard of sound teaching" and "guard the good treasure." But this leader must be more than good.

Our 27th Presiding Bishop must be something akin to Pope Francis, a leader with charisma and vision, a bishop who can call American Anglicans back to our beloved Church, a theologian with a holy calling, a pastor who can meet people at a time of most desperate need, and a preacher with an unparalleled ability to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What the Church, our Episcopal Church, needs now is another Leo the Great. **AMEN.**

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