

THE SYMBOLISM OF OUR NEW CHURCH

A sermon preached by Albert W. Palmer, D.D., LL.D., Litt.D. Central Union Church, Honolulu, Hawaii, June 1, 1924.

"What mean ye by these stones?" Joshua 4:6

It was not merely a rough pile of stones gathered from the bed of Jordan—it was also a symbol of the presence of God and His aid in time of trouble. So, in some way, practically every worth-while building which man erects comes to mean more than the obvious and becomes a symbol of the deeper truth and nobler impulses which lie behind it.

The character of a city is gathered up and symbolized by its buildings. Take Florence, for example. How the Palazzo Vecchio, the Duomo, Giotto's Tower, and the churches of San Marco and Santa Croce tell the story of its greatness! A man from Mars, ignorant of all past history, if he visited Rome and saw the Coliseum, the Forum, the Appian Way, the Aqueducts, the Dome of St. Peter's would learn the essential significance of Rome in human history if he only asked "What mean ye by these stones?" So New York City stands revealed as a center of commerce by its office buildings, its docks, bridges, subways and tunnels.

What do the buildings of Honolulu reveal? Its hotels say to the traveller, "This is a tourist resort." Its magnificent new palaces for banks and sugar factors say: "This is a place of great economic prosperity." Its schools and university say: "This is a city of high educational ideals."

In the midst of all these other buildings we have erected this new church. It also says something to the passer-by. If he should inquire, "What mean ye by these stones?", we could reply: We have built this building so that

everyone who looks upon it will say, not: "Is that a library, or a club house, or a school, or city hall?" but, promptly and without question, "That is a church!" And we have built it after the colonial style of architecture so that all might say with equal assurance, "And it is a church with a New England background!"—for we wanted this church to be a fitting tribute to the missionaries who came to these Islands from New England over a century ago bringing Christian civilization with them. We were greatly pleased when Ralph Adams Cram, our artist-architect, assured us that the colonial style was fitting for our climate because its essential elements had grown up in the semi-tropic lands around the Mediterranean and it had been used successfully in the extreme South as well as in New England.

We have put this building not on some noisy dusty corner but in a beautiful eight acre garden. One comes back from Japan deeply impressed by the beautiful setting of the temples of that beautiful land. Why not, in Hawaii also where things grow so wonderfully, why not a Christian Church surrounded by the beauty of nature? And so the garden around the church is a symbol of natural religion. We come to worship through the beauty of nature and we say with the poet, as we approach the sanctuary,

"A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot!
Rose plot, fringed pool,
Ferned grot! The veriest school
Of peace. And yet the fool
Contends that God is not—
Not God? In gardens? When the eve is cool?
Nay, but I have a sign
'Tis very sure God walks in mind!"

For a long time we were uncertain as to whether or not we could afford a spire. Now that it is built we all realize how incomplete would have been the

picture without the spire like "a sacrament of hope," as Dr. Ross called it, pointing above the trees of the garden. How wonderfully Mrs. Frear has caught the symbolism of it in her poem!

"Lo here among the palm-trees
Our isle has flung a spire—
A slender bud of beauty
Pointing higher, higher—
A lifted torch awaiting light
From Heaven's altar fire."

At the entrance to the church is a broad and simple porch of welcome—yet only one door, with a cross above the grille work. That door stands open every day and is the symbol of Christ who says, "I am the door, by me if any man shall enter in, he shall be saved; and shall go in and out, and shall find pasture!" But the approach to the door is through four columns and lighted by three great lanterns. The columns are the four gospels through which we come to know the character of Christ and hear his voice and, as to the three lanterns, they may symbolize the mystery of the Trinity—one God, one light, yet revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or, if you are practically minded rather than theological, let them stand for the three Christian graces of faith and hope and love which, seen from afar and shining upon the church, shall draw men unto the door. High in the lantern of the spire is another light shining out over land and sea as though One said, "I am the Light of the world—he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness." And above the spire flies the dove as a weather-vane—the dove of peace and symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Once inside, each man can make his own interpretation for this is a church of freedom in the quest of truth, but, if you are interested, I will give you mine. I find a symbolism of world fellowship in the different countries

represented in the wonderfully beautiful interior. The general design is clearly English, yet the chaste white beauty of it all reminds me of churches in Holland. The basilica form and vaulted ceiling are Roman but the columns speak of Greece and, back of that, of Egypt. Corinthian are the capitals, yet the details are copied not from the acanthus but from the pineapples and coconut palm fronds of Hawaii. New England contributed the small paned, round topped windows but the red-wood pews and chancel are from California and the lighting fixtures are old Italian sanctuary lamps, slightly modified to burn electricity in place of oil. "What a mixture!" one might say who reads this in cold type. But look about you — all is harmonious, all fits together as a symbol of the unity of all men and races in Christ Jesus.

To continue the symbolism may I suggest that the twelve great columns shall stand here as long as the church shall last calling to mind the twelve apostles and that the thirteen lamps represent thirteen churches —the lamp has ever been a symbol of the church. You can make up your thirteen any way you choose. Take the seven churches of Asia and add those others which figure so largely in Paul's letters—Philippi, Berea, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Rome. Think of their light shining down upon us through the centuries! Or take thirteen churches of today—the Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Disciples, Lutherans, Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Episcopalians, Dutch Reformed, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic. Let them all shine with the light of a common love of Jesus Christ. Even though we may not follow them in all details of liturgy or doctrine we will welcome their light upon the world —"Many are the lamps, but the light is one."

There are four plain panels at the rear of the church. It might be perilous to paint pictures on them in reality but let us paint them there in our imagination. On one will be Buddha, meditating on the sorrows of life

beneath the sacred Bo tree, on another Confucius writing down the wisdom of China, on a third Moses coming down from Sinai and on another Mohammed kneeling in prayer. All to remind us that there is a kinship and a common aspiration in all religions.

You may notice that there are ten glass doors opening directly out into the garden—five on either side. They are the ten commandments—we look out into life through the clear and transparent doors of the moral law. "Oh," someone says, "But here is another door at the mauka end of the aisle upon the right." Yes and over that door the eyes of faith see written: "A new commandment I give you, that ye love one another even as I have loved you!"

Above the doors are fourteen windows through whose clear glass we look up to the blue sky and flying clouds of heaven. They are for the saints and heroes of the faith who served their day and generation and are now delivered from the labors and struggles of this life. Let us put them there, not in colored glass, but in the fairer colors of our imagination. Here above the choir is St. Paul and around the corner, still to the left of the pulpit, St. Augustine. Looking directly down into the pulpit, to remind the preacher of all humility and tenderness, is St. Francis of Assisi and just beyond, to make him brave and fearless, come Joan of Arc, Savonarola, Wyclif and John Huss. On the other side of the church stand Luther, John Robinson, the pastor of the Pilgrims, David Livingstone, the representative of all missionaries, Florence Nightingale and General Booth. Above the gallery is a triple window reserved for the saints of our own land. Just now we will place in the center panel Abraham Lincoln and on either side Booker Washington and Alice Freeman Palmer.

But these are not all the windows. High in the clerestory are twelve more. We will put no names upon them. They are reserved for the future! New

saints and heroes must arise in the new days that lie ahead. We reserve one for some American Pasteur who shall win the battle against cancer and tuberculosis. One for some prison reformer who shall make our jails true hospitals for moral disease. One for some social leader who shall solve the conflict of capital and labor and bring justice and good-will to industry. Another shall yet be dedicated to some President or Senator who shall lead America out into fellowship with an organized world. Another is reserved for some Saint who shall so reveal the awfulness of the city slums that the conscience of the people shall be aroused to abolish them, and yet another window awaits the great prophet who shall burn into the souls of his generation the folly and impiety of race-prejudice and make humanity to be a real brotherhood at last. Do not forget, young men and women of the future, these un-named windows high above you. They set the goal for tasks yet unaccomplished and challenge you with unattained ideals.

As one approaches the chancel in this beautiful church home of ours the symbolism deepens. Here is the lectern with the Bible on it, reminding us of what we owe to the inspiration of the past. Here is the pulpit—for the prophetic message looking toward the future. And here in the center and focus of it all is the Communion Table ever reminding us of the mystic presence of the Christ who says, "Lo, I am with you always." High above all is the cross, the supreme symbol of our holy religion—a symbol of suffering, yet a symbol of hope. It is not a crucifix with a dead Christ upon it. Our cross is empty. Our Christ is not holden of death—He is risen and triumphant. Our cross has trefoil ends that touch it with a beauty that was not present at Calvary because for us the cross is not a symbol of defeat but of victory—Even as the text says, high above it, we hold the sublime faith that, even though crucified, "Love never faileth."

One word more! It says in Acts, "God dwelleth not in temples made by hands" and again in First Corinthians, "Ye are a temple of God." It is not the

buildings that make the city but the people in it and no church can serve apart from the men and women who gather beneath its over-arching roof. Not only the church must stand in friendly welcome in its garden in the midst of the city—its members must have the friendly heart as well. It is not enough to write "Love never faileth" upon its walls—we who worship here must believe it and practice it. Even the uplifted cross may be mute to men who do not find its power changing the lives of those who look upon it.

"Ah, friend, we never choose the better part
Until we set the cross up in the heart."

How long will this church endure and speak its magic unto men? Only so long as the people who use it are themselves first of all temples of the living God!

THE STORY OF CENTRAL UNION'S MOTTO

The Friend, February 1925, 42.

Regular worshippers at Central Union Church, and others, who less frequently but none the less definitely, are inspired by the inscription in the church chancel, will be interested in an account of how the words "Love Never Faileth" came to be chosen. The story prefaced a sermon delivered by Dr. Albert W. Palmer at the Oak Park Church recently.

One of the interesting experiences in building the new church in Honolulu, "the church in a garden," was the request which came to me from the architect, Mr. Ralph Adams Cram of Boston, to suggest an inscription to be placed high in the chancel above the pulpit, choir and communion table. "I

want you to give me a text or motto of eighteen letters and spaces to fit that particular place," said Mr. Cram.

What an interesting commission! I knew that it would be, in all probability, the only generally visible inscription in the church. It must therefore be something suitable to the many and varying uses to which a church is put. It must have something to say to the people in many moods, something not out of harmony with any of the great major experiences of human life. What text should I choose?

The text, for example, must not be inappropriate to a wedding, for many a bride will follow her attendants down the central aisle beneath this text. But it must also speak some word of consolation and hope to those who stand reverently at a funeral service as a casket is borne by loving hands to its last resting place. The text chosen must share in the joy of Christmas carols and fit with wreaths and garlands. But Good Friday will come and bring the stern note of suffering—the text must not be selected from the memory of the crucifixion. And when Easter morning comes, the text must still be true and luminous with faith and vision of eternity. What text will fit best all changing events of the year and look down on Memorial Day, on Labor Day, on Thanksgiving and Forefather's Day and add some deeper thought, some finer meaning to each in rotation as they come with the passing years?

As I went hunting for just the right words to fill the eighteen letters and spaces I said to myself: It must speak to youth —call it to action, speak the language youth understands and rejoices in —but it must also come with deepening meaning to middle age bearing the burdens and responsibilities of life's noon-day struggle. And when old age, in calm and peaceful contemplation, in the moment that, as Browning says, "calls the glory from the gray,"—when old men and women look up at it, I want them to say: "Yes, that's so! I know, for life has proved it to me!"

Honolulu is a place where many races meet and from time to time interracial gatherings are held in Central Union Church. The text must be prophetic and harmony inspiring as it looks down, upon occasion, over congregations with folk of Hawaiian, Portuguese, Filipino, Korean, Chinese, Japanese and American birth or ancestry.

Union services of many denominations are held here on Good Friday and other times. What text will rise above all sectarian differences and proclaim the great underlying unity of all who honor Jesus Christ?

In these troubled times one must also ask what words will bring the spirit of peace to a world rent with controversy, strife and fear? If war should ever come, what text would lift the supreme ideal of the Christian religion high and clear above all the hatred and horror of war? What text would go farthest to prevent war, if it could quietly and silently enter into the inmost convictions of those who read it week by week?

Moreover, the supreme use of a church is for the observance of the mystical sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Here men and women meet on the highest level of life. Here is the upper room where we sit with Christ in all that is high and holy in spite of all the Pilates and Calvaries and Judases of the world. Beyond all else, the text must gather up and interpret the meaning of the cross—it must express, so nearly as one short line may do, the very heart and center of what Jesus meant and did. Below this inscription there is a cross and the two must be in absolute harmony—telling of sacrificial love, of no easy victory apart from suffering and toil, but of invincible love giving itself even to the uttermost as Jesus did on Calvary.

And so, with all these varying needs in view, I chose this text, "LOVE NEVER FAILETH." And there it stands in rounded, golden letters high

above the chancel where it forces itself on no man's sight but where all who lift up their eyes unto the hills may read.

[Also of interest on this subject is the following letter from Dr. Albert W. Palmer to Dr. Paul Hutchinson, January 11, 1951.]

I am very much interested in your editorial in the *Christian Century* for January 10th on "Love Never Faileth." I was pastor of Central Union Church, Honolulu, when that church was built and that inscription selected. Ralph Adams Cram, of Boston, was the architect and I greatly enjoyed working out many of the details with him.

One day in 1923 he said to me: "I wish you'd select an inscription to go high in the chancel above the central cross. To be of the right proportions, it should contain just eighteen letters and spaces." It was a challenging commission, and I later worked it into a sermon on "A Search for an Inscription," later printed in my little book, "The New Christian Epic," now out of print. Briefly stated, my task was to find a short inscription which would fit all the uses to which a church is put. It must be appropriate at Christmas, New Year, Good Friday, Easter and Thanksgiving. It must speak to a strongly inter-racial community. It must have something to say to a bride walking down the aisle, and also to a group of mourners at a funeral. In times of peace it must interpret the deeper meaning of peace; and, should war arise, it still must have a message appropriate to the Christian gospel. Being in Honolulu, it must accord with the spirit of Hawaii, which is *aloha*, love.

Well, finally I found this text: "LOVE NEVER FAILETH"-just eighteen letters and spaces, as Mr. Cram had requested.

The text has greatly influenced my life for over a quarter of a century. I was not yet, in 1923, a pacifist. Some of my pacifist friends would probably question whether I am a complete and consistent pacifist today, for I believe in police action and the necessity for international controls. But this text has all the time been pushing me toward Christian pacificism, for I believe its central thesis is true.

"Love never faileth" does not mean, as I see it, that love can never be temporarily frustrated and defeated. The Greek word translated "Faileth" is *ekpiptei*, which Thayer's lexicon defines as "to fall powerless, be without effect." Love, *agape*, is an aspect of God's truth which will "never die out" (Goodspeed), which will never give up, which "abideth forever." It never becomes just a pious irrelevancy. It is not a magic formula for inevitable and instantaneous success, however, but is a personal attitude of invincible good-will to which, in every situation—personal, family, denominational, inter-racial, or international—the truly Christian soul is resolutely and irrevocably committed.

May the inscription you saw abide for many years to challenge the thoughts and consciences of all who see it—and to inspire many more good editorials in thoughtful journals like the *Christian Century*.