A BLESSED 60TH ANNIVERSARY!!!

Sixty years ago this week (November 16, 1955) St. Bartholomew’s began. Our church was organized as a new mission at a meeting called by Fr. Douglas Stoll, Rector of Advent Episcopal Church. 50 people were present and 35 signed the register as founding members. The next month, with the approval of Bishop Scaife, Father R. W. Shank was assigned as vicar.

The new mission met in a prefabricated building only 32x80 feet on a concrete slab facing Lynbrook Avenue. It was in a time when many were moving into the suburbs and the Tonawandas were growing. In fact, everything was growing outside of the city of Buffalo. Churches were being planted left and right. The nation was in the middle of a Cold War with godless communism, and it was considered a patriotic duty to go to church. Hence, only one month after our organizational meeting, 108 families were added to the rolls. As the mission continued to grow plans began for a permanent structure to be built and by December 14, 1958, Bishop Scaife broke ground for the permanent church with the new church building completed only nine months later in September of 1959.

In August of 1961, Fr. Shank left St. Bart’s to become rector of Good Shepherd Church in Parkersburg W. Virginia and Fr. Paul Henderson took over. He served until ill health brought his resignation in June of 1965, and a young vicar by the name of Fr. Russell Jay Amend took his place. Fr. Amend had served five years at the Church of the Redeemer in Niagara Falls having come there after two years as curate in the Diocese of Long Island.

It was during Fr. Amend’s time at St. Bart’s that the mission became strong enough to be incorporated as a full parish just 14 months after he became vicar. Through his leadership the church continued to grow until it was eventually the largest parish in the diocese. Attendance at his Friday night Bible Studies eventually would reach nearly 200 people by the late 1970’s. Parish giving always resulted in surplus budgets.

By 1995, Fr. Amend hired his last curate, the Rev. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. After three years Fr. Ward was chosen as our second rector after Fr. Amend retired. He continued with a focus on strong biblical preaching, and with the help of his new curate, Fr. Hubbard, greater opportunities for lay ministries. In 2003 after the Episcopal Church approved the election of homosexual bishops, St. Bart’s joined with other concerned parishes in the Episcopal Church to stand for the faith once delivered and the authority of God’s Word. With no change after five years, the clergy, vestry and membership of St. Bart’s voted to leave the Episcopal Church on May 8, 2008. During that same time, the Temple Beth-El came up for sale. It was decided by the congregation that we move into this 37,000 square foot facility. The bid of $785,000 was accepted.
Our church held its last service on December 14, at our old residence of 1064 Brighton and our newly incorporated church began with the same name as St. Bartholomew’s with the first services on Sunday December 21. In the middle of a snowstorm, 585 people attended! Prior to and during this transition, 200 members contributed to transforming a Jewish Temple into a church of Christian worship. God had miraculously provided for our congregation. We now are known as St. Bartholomew’s Anglican Church and also Pro-Cathedral to our diocese in recognition of our central role in our diocese.

But what has truly happened in these last 60 years? A legacy has been left.

**THE LORD’S LEGACY**

You see there’s a reason why St. Bartholomew’s has flourished these last fifty years. There’s a reason why a small mission that began in November of 1955 with 50 members from Advent Episcopal Church on the corner of Brighton and Fries Roads, has grown into a strong and vibrant parish of over 900 members.

It wasn’t by accident St. Bartholomew’s came to be what it is today. St. Bartholomew’s was built on a sure foundation. It was built upon the everlasting truth that Jesus Christ is Lord. And when you talk about a godly legacy, this is where it all begins: Jesus Christ is Lord. The One who said, “*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.*” (Rev. 22:13) The One Who said, “*I am the way the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me.*” (Jn. 14:6) the One to Whom “every knee shall bow and every tongue confess is Lord,” (Phil. 2:10,11) the One who is “the King of King and Lord of lords.” (Rev. 19:16).

St. Bart’s has been a vibrant witness of the Lord Jesus Christ because it has consistently sought to proclaim and live out this truth that Christ is Lord. And through the years, the people of St. Bartholomew’s have recognized that the Episcopal Church is not Lord, that our bishops are not Lord, that our priests are not Lord, that the fads of the day are not Lord, the things of this world are not Lord, no, only Jesus Christ is Lord.

And St. Bart’s has been built on this foundation, not only in words but in deeds. Jesus Christ as Lord has not only been proclaimed, it has been lived out. Fr. Amend arrived at St. Bart’s in 1965 and the Lord used him to take our church to the next level of no longer being a mission but rather a self-supporting parish. And for thirty-three years Fr. Amend not only preached and taught the Lordship of Christ, he lived it. He would tell us to pray the daily office four times a day, and do you know what? He did what he said. What you saw was what you got with Fr. Amend. He lived his faith.

Many of our curates and assisting clergy were no different: Fr. Wickenden, Fr. Montanari, Fr. Howell, Fr. Jones, and Fr. Hubbard; our deacons and then priests, Ed Kusmierczyk, John Commins and Richard Molison (who was first ordained as a deacon in 1981, later ordained as a priest in 1995 served as curate at Advent and then became Rector of St. Stephen’s in Niagara Falls before returning to us in 2006.) These were and are men who lived their faith. But it wasn’t just the clergy, it was dozens of lay leaders over the years – vestry members and wardens, Sunday School teachers, ushers, acolytes, choir members, altar guild members, Bishop Scaife Guild members and those serving in other capacities – all who sought
to keep Christ as Lord both in word and in deed. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (Jn. 14:15).

Of course Jesus taught us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. But how do we do it? The only way we can know the how and the when is by reading and understanding this book – the Holy Bible. And here at St. Bart’s this book, the Word of God, has always been front and center of everything we do. The Word of God has served as our guide and as our compass. It is through the Word that we come into a relationship with Christ. Romans 10:17 tells us “that faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” And so a godly legacy is first and foremost the Lord’s legacy and this means that it has been and remains built on the foundation of Christ’s Lordship and the Word of God.

A LIVING LEGACY

Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” (Jn. 15:5). You see not only is this godly legacy the Lords’ legacy, it is a living legacy. In other words though we reflect on the last sixty years, what has happened these last sixty years has made us who we are today. And who we are today are people alive in the Spirit. Who we are today are people who know what it means to have a relationship with the living God!

And if something is made alive by the Lord, it will be growing. What does Jesus say? If we remain in Him we will bear much fruit. We will be growing in faith, growing in knowledge and wisdom and growing in numbers. Why? Because we will be impacting others by what we say and what we do.

And when we look back at the last fifty years this is what we find at St. Bartholomew’s – 1200 persons baptized, over 1400 people confirmed, over 800 married, and over 4000 members at one time or another. Thousands impacted for the Gospel. Thousands taught, encouraged and strengthened in their walks with the Lord.

We also find examples of how St. Bartholomew’s reached out to those in dire need. In the 1957, St. Bartholomew’s sponsored three Hungarian soldiers who had defected from their country following the uprising in 1956 and came to America as refugees, in the late 70’s our church sponsored a Laotian family displaced by war, and only a few years ago the people of St. Bart’s reached out and sponsored a Moslem family from Bosnia.

And over the years, there have been countless rummage sales and fairs that have raised money for the homeless and the needy in our community. And literally hundreds of thousands of dollars given to Christ-centered ministries throughout the world. Seriously, we have seen the growth of Christ’s body here at St. Bart’s and we have seen how this growth has touched thousands around the world, all this from a few dozen who stepped out in faith, sixty years ago.

You see everything we do in the Name of Christ. Everything that has been done in faithful obedience to Him, will continue to impact people. It is like that little pebble thrown into the water. After it hits the water the ripples go outward touching a far greater area than the size of that first splash. Or it is like
that mustard seed that is the tiniest seed but grows into a huge tree. The Bible tells us that we plant and water, but God gives the growth.

And so we are part of something that is not only greater than ourselves but is living and active. We are members of a growing body of Christ, interconnected by our baptisms and by the Holy Spirit who lives in us, and not only linked together one to another here at St. Bartholomew’s but linked together with every other Christian believer and body of Christ throughout the world and throughout time. You see a godly legacy is a living legacy. It is one that is alive, and it is one that is constantly bearing fruit.

**A LASTING LEGACY**

But not only are we part of a living legacy we are also part of a lasting legacy, a legacy that will remain forever. A legacy that is eternal. For what we do on this earth is not only something we leave behind for our children and our children’s children, it is something we take with us. And what we take with us is our relationship with the Lord and the good that we do on this earth. You see it is by God’s grace and the power of the Holy Spirit working in us that good works come about. And it is the good that we do on earth that will be what we take with us. And that good serves as an eternal reward. It is a testimony to God’s grace and our faithfulness. And it is something that can never be taken away from us.

Why do you think Jesus said, “*Don’t lay up for yourselves treasures four yourselves upon earth where moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal. But build up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth or rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal.*” (Mt. 6:19-20).

For when all is said and done, it will be only those things that have been done in Christ’ name and to His glory that will be remembered. Everything else is passing away. Everything done at City Hall in Buffalo is passing away (I know some of you are thinking “thank God!”), all the construction projects and new developments, all the laws, the philosophies, and works of man, all those Bills and Sabres games, all the parties and escapades of this community will be long gone and forgotten. But what was done here in the name of Christ and to His glory – the babies baptized, the young people confirmed, the healings, the miracles, the marriages saved, the poor helped, the grieving comforted, the addicts set free, the gospel proclaimed, the money given for the Lord’s work – those things will be remembered. Such things will be celebrated in glory.

And so my brothers and sisters this is our godly legacy. It’s why St. Bart’s has grown and flourished these last sixty years. But what of the next sixty years? Every church is on a journey. And it is only fitting that we be in a state of planning. We have been here for seven years now. The same strengths that have given us a living and lasting legacy will indeed help us, but we need to look at where we are today, if we are to plan for the future. With that in mind, I began meeting with Fr. Molison and Deacon John Reitz to look at the state of our parish. We asked three other lay leaders to meet with us and we formed what we would like to call the Core Team. A group to begin a parish wide discernment process with the goal of examining ourselves in light of our current context – cultural, demographic, and spiritual so that we can maximize our potential as a church of Jesus Christ. The first step in such a process is what is called a SWOT analysis. This is where we look at our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to our parish. We asked five key groups to do this – the Core Team, the Vestry, Lay Leaders, the Staff, and
the Youth. While there were many points listed by each of these groups, we have tallied the top three in each category. I would like to share these with all present. (Please see handout). Here they are:

**TOP STRENGTHS**

1) Biblical Foundation and Christ-centered Focus  
2) Leadership - both clergy and lay  
3) Congregation - fellowship/lay ministries/generosity

**TOP WEAKNESSES**

1) Outreach  
   a) impacting the community  
   b) attracting young families  
   c) keeping youth involved while in high school and beyond  
2) Lack of member involvement  
3) Community’s Unfamiliarity with our Anglican Identity

**BEST OPPORTUNITIES**

1) Outreach  
2) Increase visibility  
   a) events  
   b) social media, website, internet  
   c) outdoor space  
3) Expanded use of Fr. Amend Hall

**BIGGEST THREATS**

1) Resistance to Change  
2) Changing Culture  
3) Changing Demographics

It is important that we understand who we are and what we want to become. This is the first step. The next step will be to discern a vision for our parish; to develop a purpose and mission statement that can be lived out within the context of our parish family and surrounding community. Next week, we will look at why this is important and how we can prepare for a bright future. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, AMEN!