

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward Jr.+ Rector

Scripture: Nehemiah 1-2

***"Let Us Arise and Build (part 1A)***

**FOURTEEN YEARS LATER**

Fourteen years ago this month I began serving St. Bartholomew's as your curate. I had just turned 28. I was fresh out of seminary. My wife, Kathleen, and I had been married for two years. And coming back to Western New York, was a homecoming of sorts for us. I had been raised here (in the town of Boston) but had been away in Virginia for most of the past six years. My wife was from Rochester, but had spend the last 9 years first in Florida and then in Virginia.

Now I didn't know too much about the rector, Fr. Amend, except that he had a vibrant church, loved the Lord, and was committed to preaching and teaching the Word of God. I knew that he had been at St. Bart's for many years. It seemed like a good fit and it turned out to be. I was blessed to be able to learn from Fr. Amend, and to be in a parish with many committed believers. When he retired at the end of 1998, your wardens and vestry asked me to be the rector of St. Bart's. And the rest, as they say, is history.

It is hard to believe it has been fourteen years. We were all a bit younger then, and since that time we have grown in many ways as a parish. We had to transition from the long tenured rectorship of Fr. Amend and we did so with the help of Fr. Montanari. There was a period of uncertainty as to where would I find a new curate. It took over two years. Finally, the Lord sent us Fr. Hubbard who came as our new curate in July 2001. He and his wife were instrumental in helping us get new lay ministries started - especially the Beth Moore Bible Study. Then Fr. Jones (former curate '83-85) returned to us in the Fall of 2001, in a part-time capacity as assisting priest. He blessed us with his ministry for two years, until, he was called home by the Lord the day after Christmas in 2003.

We went through events like the Y2K scare and 9/11 together. We faced an Episcopal church that was fast becoming a church that had forgotten the authority and truth of God's Word. And we had to deal at times with a hostile bishop who threatened to turn us into a mission. But we stuck together and we pressed on. Despite the resistance by the diocese we were able to have Ed Kusmierczyk and John Reitz ordained deacons. Fr. Commins came in July of 2005, as a new curate after Fr. Hubbard received the call to be rector of St. Elizabeth's, in Savannah, Georgia. And then Fr. Molison returned to St. Bart's in 2006, after retiring as rector of St. Stephen's in Niagara Falls.

And so the first time in St. Bart's history, we had a five member clergy staff with three full time clergy; each committed to God's Word, each sensitive to the pastoral needs of God's people, and each who respect and admire the others. Such a team is a rarity in a church. All three bishops - Ackerman, Duncan, and Atwood - when they visited our parish, commented to me that I am blessed to have such a good clergy staff.

Last year, in the face of the possibility of leaving our grounds we prepared for all options: building a new facility, looking for a vacant Roman Catholic Church or other building. About the same time, *Temple Beth-El*, came up for sale. After several months of study and preparation we made the move. We now have been here for nearly nine months. Much work and time has gone into transforming this place into our new home. Every month new members join us. The future has never looked brighter.

## **NEHEMIAH AND REBUILDING THE WALLS**

But if we are to prepare for the future together, we need to have a plan, we need to know our purpose, we need to be committed to the Lord and to one another. Last January I began address these needs by looking at **Nehemiah 2**. Please turn to **Nehemiah chapters 1 & 2**. Nehemiah was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of the Persian Empire - the main superpower of the day. He had heard of how Jerusalem had been left in ruins and he asked the king if he could return there to rebuild it. The King granted his request. And so Nehemiah took the trip and he was disturbed by what he saw - the city had been neglected, the walls were broken down, the infrastructure almost gone. Rather, than remaining disheartened, he told the leaders in and outside of Jerusalem what he had seen, and how the Persian King had granted him favor, and they responded, "**Let us arise and build.**" The leaders had been motivated by Nehemiah's faith and determination and as a result, they committed to rebuilding the city walls.

Thankfully, our "walls" aren't in such disrepair - we may have felt that way back in November when we were renovating this place, but we are now on sure footing. And yet, the Anglican witness in Western New York, in most of the country has been greatly diminished by the actions of the Episcopal Church. In fact, in many respects, the walls of the Anglican Church have crumbled in North America. Who will rebuild them? My brothers and sisters, the task rests with us.

As members of the new Anglican Church in North America, we now have a role to play in rebuilding a vibrant Anglican Church and to share with our community the strengths of the Anglican tradition. For although there are many good churches in Western New York, the sad fact is that our region is still spiritually depressed. And because it is spiritually depressed, it will remain economically and politically depressed. The only hope for our community is Jesus Christ. And the only way they will know about Jesus is through His Body, the Church.

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are called to be the harbingers of God's light. We are called to proclaim the truth and love of Jesus Christ in word and deed. If we are not witnesses of Christ's transforming power and love, there is no one else who will do it. It is an awesome privilege and responsibility. And it rests with us.

The truth is Christ's body is the only hope for mankind: His body given for us on the cross, and His body, the Church. We are all members of that one body. Members that need each other, and when working together as the Body of Christ, the means of God's grace and blessing for our world.

And as the Body of Christ, not only do we have the responsibility to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, but we also are called to transform this place we call home, into a house of worship, prayer and ministry that glorifies the Lord. And that means, my friends there is more work to be done. And it is why your leadership - the clergy, the wardens and vestry have decided to embark on a "Faith Journey" called "*Let Us Arise and Build.*"

## **A FAITH JOURNEY AND MISSION INITIATIVE**

This three year "Faith Journey" really is a mission initiative for its purpose is to help each member of St. Bartholomew's to know the vision and mission of this church and to enable each member to actively support the vision and mission of the Church. As the ushers pass out a brochure on this mission initiative, I would like to now highlight some of the key points in the brochure.

The Bible says "***Without a vision, the people perish.***" (*Proverbs 29:18*)

What is our vision?

**Our Vision:** to be a Christ-centered, Bible-Believing Anglican Church committed to fulfilling the Great Commission.

What is our mission?

**Our Mission:** to proclaim the truth and love of the Lord Jesus Christ in word and deed by the power of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of God the Father.

What will be the goal of the *Let Us Arise and Build* mission initiative?

**Our Goal:** to challenge every member of St. Bartholomew's to make a Holy Spirit led commitment to support the vision and mission of St. Bartholomew's.

I also would like to highlight something else - **the need to be in prayer**; to come before God in humility confessing our sins and seeking His mercy and grace, thanking Him for what He has done and what He will do through us as we remain faithful and obedient to the Lord. Recall that is exactly what Nehemiah did before he spoke to the King and before he went on his journey (**Neh. 1:4-11**). If we are going to build a Bible-believing, Christ-centered Anglican Church committed to fulfilling the Great Commission, then we must be grounded in prayer as members of Christ's body both corporately and individually. That is why at the end of the service everyone will be given a *Let Us Arise and Build* prayer devotional to use during your prayer time and why everyone is encouraged to pay at least one hour in our new prayer room on the second floor during the next 33 days.

## **A TIMELY VISION**

Two days ago day, I went to the Anglican news website, virtueonline.org, and looked again at David Virtue's January 2009 article which described our move out of the Episcopal Church. After his article, there were comments that people could add. One of the comments came from one of our members.

She wrote these words:

*"I had a dream on June 14, 2007, that all of the clergy of St. Bartholomew's were together wearing their vestments and holding up high the Word of God with all of our acolytes marching forward with the Church cross. All of the people of St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church were standing in a huge circle holding hands surrounding our clergy, acolytes, and the Sr. Choir. We were all singing the hymn, "Lift High The Cross." My husband and all of the men were holding metal shovels. Next all of the men started digging in the ground. I believe that the Lord gave me this dream to tell me that we would soon be breaking new ground. It is no accident that Temple Beth EL Synagogue located less than one mile away from our current property became available for our congregation to purchase. Psalm 118:23 says, "The Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes."*

The Lord indeed has done a great work in our midst and it is marvelous in our eyes. And He will continue to do a great work in our midst as we remain open to His Holy Spirit, as we seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness and as we humbly walk before Him in prayer and thanksgiving. Yes, much has happened, we have much to be grateful for, but I believe the best is yet to come. So let us begin. Let us arise and build! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!