

Pentecost 10 2009
Service to introduce new stoles

Instead of dealing with the appointed lessons for this Sunday, I thought that we might enjoy a bit of “show and tell.” You see, ten years ago when I became your rector, I fell in love with this sanctuary, but like all misguided lovers, I also harbored certain thoughts of how it could be changed. Over the course of the last decade, we have done a number of things to make this wonderful sanctuary even more lovely. We replaced the old brass cross that so distracted our line of sight from the beauty of the reredos. Thanks to a gift from Curtis Vouwie, we were able to have that wooden cross made which blends in so well with the reredos and the sanctuary. In addition, we replaced those “flying saucer” light fixtures with new overhead fixtures and sconces that not only provide better lighting but which also allow us to enjoy the beauty of our vaulted ceiling. New carpet and new kneelers have also made our space more warm and welcoming. One problem, however, that these projects did not address was related to the vestments of the clergy. The stoles that the clergy wore were an odd assortment with different hues from different eras, some bought by the clergy themselves and a few others left over from the church’s stores. On any given Sunday, the three clergy folk might be decked out in three entirely different stoles with different shades of same color from different traditions with different signs and symbols.

Now while I was on sabbatical, as many of you know, Ann and I spent some time at an Anglican seminary in South Africa where I was introduced to a wonderful array of stoles made by a group of local crafts persons. What distinguished these stoles was not only their rich colors and beautiful designs but also that they had three panels, two down the front like a traditional stole and one down the back, a design that gives them more color, more room for signs and symbols and more stability on the neck and shoulders of the wearer. When I got back from Africa, I wrote to the folks at the seminary and got the name of these remarkable seamstresses – Jubilate – and then I approached the members of the altar guild to see if they would help design a set of twelve stoles, three identical stoles for each of the church’s four seasons. They agreed to the plan and we had a wonderful time talking about the symbols and colors that we would ask to be part of the stoles’ design and then Connie Bergh did a masterful job of creating a series of drawings that we sent off to the good ladies of Jubilate. In the mean time, we received a special bequest to pay for the stoles from the family of Peter Stone who wished to give them in his memory – a very fitting tribute to a faithful priest of this parish for many years. The project took a number of months to complete with e-mails flying back and forth, but the stoles arrived this summer and I am delighted to tell you that they surpassed our expectations. We think that they are beautiful and will add a new dimension to our already exquisite sanctuary.

The first set of stoles that I will show you this morning is the green set, used for the long season of Pentecost and the winter season of Epiphany. In the upper section of the front two panels you will see a wonderful rendering of Sandhill cranes with their bright red crowns and one leg delicately raised with the claw holding a large brown stone. Cranes are an ancient religious symbol, primarily because they were semi-domesticated

birds, living very close to human communities who were then able to watch their communal and individual behavior. In medieval times, stories and legends about various animals were written down in “Bestiaries” which were widely read by all sorts of interested folk. In Christian bestiaries the crane came to represent vigilance and loyalty. You see, it was thought that within each community of cranes, one bird was designated king and each night the others would gather round this royal crane in a circle to protect him from danger and harm. To insure his safety through the night, sentries were appointed and in order to make sure that they did not fall asleep at their post, each sentry held a stone in a lifted claw, knowing that if they did fall asleep, the stone would drop into the water waking them up – vigilance and loyalty.

Beneath the crane is a design that the women of Jubilate added and it would appear that it is either a group of reeds or a palm frond, both of which have roots in early Christian symbolism. The reeds would represent the gathering of the faithful, those securely planted along the banks of the waters of baptism. The palm is a very ancient Christian symbol that stands for victory, the ultimate victory of the king welcomed on Palm Sunday who through his death and resurrection was victorious over death and the grave. On the back panel of the stole is a fascinating symbol of three fish united in a circle.

The fish is one of the most ancient of Christian symbols. Perhaps some of you have heard about how early Christians would identify each other during the persecutions by drawing or displaying a fish. This rich symbol has several layers of meaning. On one hand, it represents an acrostic from the Greek word for “fish” – *IXTHUS*. The iota stands for the first letter of Jesus’ name, there being no “j” in the Greek alphabet. The chi stands for Christ and the theta for “theou” the possessive “of God”. The upsilon stands for the Greek word for “son” and the sigma for “savior”. Hence the acrostic was interpreted “Jesus Christ Son of God and Savior.” The second layer of meaning can be seen in the early Christian drawings that have survived in the corridors of the catacombs of Rome. There we see any number of representations of fish and baskets of bread, a reference to the feeding of the five thousand which is itself a symbol of the Eucharist. The final layer of meaning goes back to the image of a fish without water. Just as a fish cannot live outside of water, so a Christian cannot live outside of the waters of baptism.

The fact that there are three fish united in a circle is, of course, a symbol of the Trinity and again, it is a very ancient representation. One of earliest representations of these three united fish, the Trinacria actually had them sharing one head with their bodies protruding out like the spokes of a wheel. Later, the symbol evolved into three fish swimming in a circle, mouths attached to tails.

Following the seasons of Pentecost and Epiphany are the seasons of Advent and Lent, both seasons denoted by the color purple and marked by spiritual preparations of repentance and self-examination, focusing on the coming of Christ and his sacrifice on the cross. The front panels of our purple stoles are filled with a beautiful rendition of thistles which should make every Scottish heart sing. The thistle is a symbol of the sorrow and sin of earthly life taken from the 3rd chapter of the Book of Genesis where

God curses the disobedient Adam: *“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you and you shall eat the plants of the field (verses 17&18).* Thistles are a thorny plant and as such they are also a sign of Christ’s acceptance of that sorrow and suffering through his Passion, particularly the bearing of the crown of thorns. On the back panel of the stole is a bird that you may have trouble recognizing. It is an English goldfinch with its splash of red. The goldfinch is also a symbol of the Passion of Christ because it feeds on thistle seeds, the fruit of the thorny plant, turning them into to life-giving nourishment. If you go to the medieval or renaissance wing of an art museum and search out a rendition of the Madonna and child, chances are you will find a goldfinch in the picture. Those artists always wished to remind their viewers of the connection between the incarnation of God in the baby Jesus with the reality of the grown man’s crucifixion and resurrection.

Following the seasons of Advent and Lent, we have the two great feasts of the Christian year, Christmas and Easter and their color is white, the most festive of the Christian palette. Our white stoles are particularly stunning. On the front two panels are beautiful representations of pomegranates. The pomegranate was again an ancient Christian symbol of the church. Each seed represented a particular congregation and yet all these seed were united in the one casing, the Body of Christ. You also might remember the ancient Greek myth of Persephone. Quite often Christians would adopt such myths and give them new meaning through the tenets of the faith. Persephone, you might remember, was forced to remain in Hades for six months of the year because she ate six (some say four and some say eight) pomegranate seeds and so for those months the world was cold and lifeless until she returned to bring the warmth and growth of Spring. Easter is, of course, the ultimate expression of the new life of spring, the promise of new and everlasting life with God in Christ. The pomegranates represent that promise.

On the back panel of the white stoles is the image of dolphins leaping out of the water. The dolphin was one of those ancient symbols that the early Christians baptized with new meaning. Dolphins were believed to be not only playful creatures that accompanied ships, but also were thought to be special friends of men and sailors. It was thought that they would actually save those folk who fell over board at sea, carrying them safely to shore. For example, there was the ancient tale of the gifted lyre player Arion who was thrown overboard by jealous companions but was saved and carried to the safety of shore by accompanying dolphins. Dolphins came to be identified as symbols of salvation and resurrection, fitting signs of the glories of Christmas and Easter.

The final set of stoles is the red set which are used for the great feast of Pentecost and for those of various Saints. The front panels are filled with flames, recalling the first day of Pentecost when the Book of Acts relates that flames came from the heads of the disciples: *“Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them (Acts 2:3).* Since then, flames have always symbolized the presence of the Holy Spirit. On the back panel is the image of a lamb which has several Biblical roots. John the Baptist, when first seeing Jesus, turns to his disciples and says *“Behold the lamb*

of God.” At the other end of the New Testament is the vision of John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation. There we see the lamb in the midst of the heavenly host. Lambs are sacrificial creatures, carried innocently to be slaughtered, but this lamb holds a banner that represents victory. It is the lamb that through his sacrifice offers humankind victory over death through the body and blood of the Eucharist.

Our new stoles are both beautiful and meaningful and I sincerely hope and pray that they will be an inspiration for this parish, a reminder that in the midst of all the changes and transitions of life, even the dark portals of death, God’s promise is true and that Christ’s love will always bring new hope, new grace, new life to us all.

One man who certainly believed that truth was the Rev. Peter Stone, a faithful member and minister of this parish for many, many years. As I mentioned earlier, upon Peter’s death this past winter, his family made a very generous gift to St. John’s in his memory, part of which was designated to pay for these stoles. It seems right and fitting, therefore, that we dedicate these vestments in recognition of the many gifts that he shared with this parish community.

*O Lord Jesus Christ, you told your disciples “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”: mercifully hear our prayers and bless and sanctify these stoles that your servants who wear them may faithfully proclaim your love and grace in word and sacraments so that they and the flock committed to their care may serve as your Body and gracefully and gratefully obtain the promise of your everlasting redemption. This we pray in your name through our faith in your Word –
Amen.*

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