



The Bishop's Address
The 177th Annual Convention of the Diocese of Alabama

I greet you in the grace and peace of Christ as we gather in this 177th Annual Convention. We are very grateful for the hospitality of the clergy and good people of St. Stephen's Church, our hosts for this convention. We salute them for their vibrant and vital ministry in this city. St. Stephen's is sometimes called "God's treehouse" because of its setting on a wooded hill in Cahaba Heights and its richly organic architecture, fitting well with our convention theme: "Tending the Garden: Our Stewardship of Creation."

As a visual image for our convention I offer you the stunning picture of the earth seen from space for the first time in December, 1968. It shows the earth in its beautiful and living wholeness, like a brilliant blue green gem in the darkness of space. This magical and fragile planet we call home is God's creation we believe, not just a random development of astrophysical processes. It is, in Matthew Fox's words, God's "original blessing." In the Genesis narrative when God saw it on the

sixth day he said, “Behold, it is very good.” This image shows us not a world divided into competing nations and divided races and peoples. It shows one living organism with beautiful diversity. We are fallen to be sure and need God’s redeeming grace through the cross for our mending. But this is one world, made by one God, for one humanity to share with all living creatures.

I ask you to keep this image before your eyes throughout our convention. In words that reflect the incarnational spirituality of our Celtic Christian forbearers, “deep peace of the quiet earth to you, deep peace of the shining stars, deep peace of the flowing air, deep peace of the running wave, deep peace of the Son of Peace to you.”

As we gather in this council of the church there is much to celebrate and much to challenge us in our life together.

First we celebrate our fine new Bishop Suffragan Kee Sloan. We are grateful for Kee and his call to the ministry of the episcopate, and for Tina and their family. I could not be more delighted to have such a gifted new Episcopal colleague and look forward to our ministry together among you as servants of the servants of God. Let us thank our Bishop Suffragan Search Committee, ably chaired by the Honorable Bernard Harwood, for much hard and faithful work during the year past.

I also want to say how grateful I am for your very warm welcome to our Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori, during her visit for Kee's consecration. She had an excellent experience of the life and vigor of our diocese and said afterward, "I was signally impressed with the vitality I encountered... You are an icon of a healthy mission-focused diocese for which the whole church gives thanks." These are encouraging words and it was very good to have her with us.

With Bishop Sloan we enthusiastically welcome to our diocesan staff Leslie Bridgers Manning our new Youth Ministry Assistant and the Rev. Pat Wingo our new Deputy for Ministry Development and Clergy Deployment. We are very blessed to have them join us. In the year past we have been grateful for the assistance of Bishop Miller in parish visitations and have given hearty thanks for the ministry of The Rev. Bill King as he retired from the diocesan staff last fall. Our diocesan team is now a protean combination of fresh leadership and experienced wisdom, and I look forward to our work together on your behalf.

Our ACTS 2: Living our Vision Together Campaign has been a resounding success, thanks to the generosity and leadership of many across our diocese. To date we have received nearly \$6.3 million in pledges and the gift of a lovely yacht which when sold will bring the total to nearly \$6.5 million. This is a signal expression of the vitality, generosity, and commitment to God's mission of the Episcopalians in this diocese and we must all say a resounding "thanks be to God" for this great venture forward in faith. To Felix Drennen and our excellent

campaign cabinet we owe a great and lasting debt of thanks. Well done good and faithful servants.

It is a very good thing that ACTS 2 exceeded our goal because the new chapel at Camp is proving to be more costly than our estimates several years ago. We have been able to allocate additional funds to the chapel, but we still need a bit more to complete the building properly. So if you have not made an ACTS 2 pledge I urge you to do so at this convention. And even if you have done, consider “being a brick” by buying a brick. A careful plan has been developed by the council for the other five projects of ACTS 2, according to the estimated cash flow of pledge payments, and we all look forward to their bearing fruit among us.

We also celebrate the dedication yesterday of Trinity Commons: The Episcopal Student Center in Birmingham. This is our third residential campus center in the diocese and it is a beautiful and hospitable facility. Bill Blackerby has done magnificent and patient work over the past seven years in making the Commons a reality and we salute him and our generous donors with deep gratitude. Trinity Commons speaks of our commitment to college and young adult ministry, which is one of the key areas of mission today.

Our companion diocese relationship with Haiti is developing effectively, with two mission trips in recent months and substantial work being done with our Haitian friends in education, child nutrition, the provision of potable water, and medical care. I urge your parishes and people to get involved with Haiti and

promise that it will be a transforming experience of mission and Christian relationship. There is a Creole proverb, “Men anpil chay pa lou,” (Many hands make the load lighter) and I hope that we will take it to heart.

Our Hispanic ministry continues to be a significant and stretching mission among us under the able leadership of Hernan Afanador and others across the diocese. Our Race Relations Task Force is doing great work in anti-racism ministry and in showing us how better to embrace the beautiful diversity of God’s world. Our urban ministries such as that of the people of Christ Church, Fairfield, the pre-school partner ministries of St. Luke’s, Birmingham and Grace, Anniston, and St. John’s, Montgomery, and free medical clinics sponsored by St. Michael and All Angels, Anniston, Grace, Cullman, and St. John’s, Decatur, and countless other Jubilee and outreach ministries in our parishes show the way to being a servant church. Gates Shaw’s workshop today asks “Can the Episcopal Church ‘preach to the poor’?” I trust that the answer is and will be a strong “yes.”

Finally, we celebrate this year the Sesquicentennial of the University of the South, Sewanee. Alabama is a founding diocese of Sewanee and I am privileged to serve as Chancellor during this 150th Celebration, a significant milestone in the history of what is the finest shared ministry of the Episcopal Church in the South. The university now includes students from 40 states and 20 foreign countries, and has almost completed a drive to raise \$180 million dollars for scholarship endowment, faculty enhancement, and needed buildings, to which the Sewanee community in this diocese has been most generous. Dr. Samuel Williamson, the

14th Vice-Chancellor of Sewanee, will be with us tomorrow to tell us more. For now we can say “Yea, Sewanee’s Right.”

As we celebrate these many gifts and achievements in our ministry the 133rd Psalm comes to mind, often called in these parts the “Sewanee Psalm:”:

Behold, how good and pleasant it is,
When brethren live together in unity!
It is like fine oil upon the head
That runs down upon the beard,
Upon the beard of Aaron,
And runs down the collar of his robe.
It is like the dew of Hermon
That falls upon the hills of Zion
For there God has ordained the blessing:
Life forevermore.

We have known that unity and blessing in our life together in the past year and more, and it is good and pleasant indeed.

It is my fondest hope that in these fractious times in the larger church and Anglican Communion such a spirit of unity and shared purpose will prevail at the Lambeth Conference this summer in Canterbury. It is high time that we repent of the divisions that are hampering us and get on with the mission of God, which will

be a theme of the conference. Bishop Sloan and I will attend Lambeth for three weeks, with over 600 Anglican bishops throughout the world, and we ask for your constant prayers in the coming months for this very important decennial event.

We have much indeed to celebrate in our diocese, but celebration is never enough for the disciples of Jesus Christ. As Lent reminds us we are called to take up the cross with Jesus. We are not meant to stay in our comfortable pews but to go into the world. We are sent into the midst of the suffering and pain of life to be partners with God in the healing of the world. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*, the grace of Jesus Christ is costly grace, ‘costly because it costs a person his life, and grace because it gives the only true life.’

In 2008 we find ourselves in a world of enormous challenges. The Millennium Development Goals that we are embracing in our outreach mission as Episcopalians highlight the major needs of the world. All are urgent and daunting, but none is greater than the world environmental crisis our generation is facing. Climate change and global warming, the loss of natural habitat and increasing extinction of species, air and water pollution, and environmental degradation are facing the people and living creatures of earth with an urgency not seen before in known human history.

I recognize that there is a degree of “media hype” about environmental issues and a range of opinion about the complex causes. But the overwhelming scientific evidence points to a very serious situation created in great part by our

unbridled human consumption and exploitation of nature, our wanton waste and pollution, and lack of reverence for the earth and other living creatures. This appears to be a watershed moment in history. Such a moment calls upon people of faith to pay attention, to look deeply into the Scriptures and ask what God would have us do, and to act.

The World Wildlife Fund has issued a study recently identifying 200 places in the world most critically in need of environmental preservation and conservation efforts. Of these they selected the 19 most significant, one of which is the Tennessee River-Mobile Bay basin. This includes most of our state and diocese. As our trail-blazing diocesan Environmental Task Force has been telling us, the world ecological crisis is in our own front yard. This gives us in Alabama a unique and compelling opportunity to respond and offer Christian leadership.

Jurgen Moltmann, one of the seminal theologians of our day, has written:

I see the greatest task of the church of Christ today as being the ecological reformation of the religion of modernity. The proposition of an ecological shift in modern industrial society is a spiritual and cultural shift which has roots in a new religious experience of the reality of God and of nature.....a new respect for nature and a new reverence for the life of other creatures. Does modern society have a future? Its future is repentance.

That is a resounding challenge to the church. Repentance means to change course, to adopt God's agenda rather than our own. The environmental crisis is a spiritual crisis, and extension of our human fallenness and idolatry. The ecological reformation of religion suggests that we need to reclaim the spiritual vision of our Christian heritage that sees the earth as divine gift and all living creatures as holy and sacred to God. We need to repent of being a culture of consumption and become a culture of conservation. This is our challenge and our future.

We are well-accustomed to our Lord's Commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. In our time we must learn that the earth and her creatures are neighbors too. They are icons of the beauty and glory of God, calling out for our love and care. The dappled splendor of an old forest, birdsong and whalesong – as holy as a choir, the dance of dolphins and dragonflies, the flight of geese and the 'exultation of larks', the splendor of the grasses and flowers – these are sacred and what we do to them matters to God. It matters to our children and our children's children. It matters to the poor of the earth, who will suffer the most from environmental crisis.

This calls for the greening of the church. This can no longer be something we do only at Christmas. The greening of the church must be year-round. We need to learn again to see God's presence in and through all living things. As the psalmist says, "all things are filled with his glory." We must recognize that radically reducing our carbon footprint, our consumption of non-renewable resources, our destruction of natural habitat, and our wasteful excess is a way of

serving and praising God. As Ghandi said, we must “be the change we want to see” – greener theology, greener churches, greener lives.

All this is rooted in reclaiming the foundational theology of Genesis that tells us that men and women are made to be God’s stewards, to tend God’s garden of the earth in fellowship with all living things. This is our original vocation. Stewardship means caring for what belongs to another. This is God’s world we believe – this dazzling gem of a planet in the midst of space. We were made in God’s image to care for it as his viceroys and stewards. As the Native American Chief Seattle said, the earth was not made for us; we were made for the earth.

For far too long the Western world has lived by the dictum that ‘man is the measure of all things’ and by Adam Smith’s theory of the “wealth of nations.” We must repent of such anthropocentrism and self-centered economic thinking. God made and loves all living things, not just us. God made a world of beautiful ecological diversity and balance. We were created not just to consume and use the earth’s living things for ourselves. We are called to care for them and to give back to the earth more than we take from it. As children of God we are not consumers. We are stewards.

Alabama native E. O. Wilson of Harvard in his little book *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* calls the church to act in solidarity with the sciences in recovering our vocation of stewardship. Acknowledging that religion and science are the two most powerful forces in the world today, he writes “If science

and religion could be united on the common ground of biological conservation, the problem would soon be solved. If there is any moral precept shared by people of all beliefs, it is that we owe ourselves and future generations a beautiful, rich, and healthful environment.” We would add that we owe it to God.

Wilson’s book is a gauntlet thrown down before the churches. Here is a place where we need to come together, conservatives, moderates, and liberals, evangelicals and progressives, low church, high church, and broad church, and Anglican Christians of every stripe across the world, to offer a courageous moral vision of environmental stewardship and conservation for the health of creation.

We look very forward to Bishop McDonald’s keynote address later today but for now let me suggest three things that the “ecological reformation of the religion of modernity” and the greening of the church might mean for us. I believe that these are ways in which we are being called to take up the cross in our time.

As the church we must recover our sense of the sacredness of all life and teach of God’s passionate love for the living things of earth. We must learn again to see not just God’s transcendence but also God’s immanence in the world. Theologically this is called “panentheism.” Not pantheism, which sees nature as god, but panentheism, the understanding that the Spirit of God, the Lord and giver of life, moves in and through all living things. As Ernesto Cardinal has written, “The bird chorus in the early morning sings to God. Volcanoes, clouds, and trees shout about God. All creation cries out with a loud voice that God is, is beautiful

and loves. God's signature is on the whole of nature. All creatures are love letters from God to us. The whole of nature is bursting with love, set in it by God, who is love, to kindle the fire of love in us." Responding to such deeply ecological spirituality, Jurgen Moltmann goes so far as to say, "What we do to the earth we do to Christ."

Our worship and our spirituality need to better reflect this theological vision and our primal calling to be stewards of the earth. To focus us I will appoint the last Sunday in April, the nearest after International Earth Day, April 22, each year to be Stewardship of Creation Sunday in our diocese, with a special liturgy to be provided for use in our parishes. This will raise our consciousness and provide creative opportunity for our children and youth to contribute their gifts and hopes. Hopefully it will help engender year-round ecological awareness and action.

Secondly, we need to look very carefully at the "carbon footprint" of our parish church facilities and of our lives and businesses to see how we can reduce our consumption, waste, and pollution. I urge each parish to do an "energy audit" as we have done at Carpenter House, and plan ways to conserve energy. I urge each of us in our private and working lives to do the same and adopt new disciplines and patterns of sacrifice to enable us to be better stewards of God's good earth. I hasten to say that this is not just a matter of "political correctness" or financial frugality. It needs to become for us a way to praise God and to do evangelism.

The Environmental Task Force has written a covenant which invites us to a make a commitment to environmental stewardship. I urge you to sign and live it and take it back to your congregations.

Finally, let us join forces with conservation efforts in our diocese and state and show to all our commitment as Episcopalians to environmental stewardship. Our Environmental Task Force has led the way in partnering with the World Wildlife Fund, the Cahaba River Society, and the Nature Conservancy. Let us invite such groups to our churches to present programs on the environment and share ways to conserve and speak prophetically to our culture of consumption. We are greatly blessed by ecological richness of Camp McDowell and the superb environmental center we support there. It is a model of Christian ecological leadership. We need to build on this resource and be a beacon of environmental leadership in this state, as we seek to protect one of the 19 most significant ecological areas on earth.

There is great challenge and great opportunity before us in offering spiritual leadership in response to what may be the most urgent challenge of this century. It is not just in the dew of Hermon that falls upon the hills of Zion that God has “ordained the blessing, life forevermore.” God has ordained it right here, in this holy land.

We have much to celebrate today and much to challenge us in the days to come. Let us embrace God’s call to us as stewards of creation with new passion

and commitment. And may we in this and all things be courageous and joyful bearers of the Gospel to all people in the Name of Christ who, as the Epistle to the Colossians says, is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible...all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together.”

These are profound words for our time. All things have been created through Christ and for Christ. In Christ all things hold together. This is one world, made by one God, for one humanity to share with all living things. Fallen we are, but God’s last word is always resurrection. The Spirit is present in and through all, redeeming, restoring, and renewing the whole creation. In Wendell Berry’s words, we must “practice resurrection.”

So love and serve Christ with all your hearts, in all your ways, all your days, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit. God bless you.

The Rt. Rev. Henry N. Parsley Jr.

22 February 2008