

**MASS IN COMMEMORATION  
OF THE BICENTENNIAL JUBILEE OF THE DIOCESE OF RICHMOND**

July 12, 2020

Isaiah 55:10–11 • Romans 8:18–23 • Matthew 13:1–23

**I.**

At the beginning of 2020,  
much less in 2018, when planning for the diocesan bicentennial began,  
no one could have imagined what would transpire during this jubilee year.

A worldwide pandemic and quarantine.

Then, loud calls for racial justice amid nationwide social upheaval and civil unrest,  
especially here in Richmond.

What a challenging year it has been so far,  
including for the Church.

Lives, plans, activities, and programs have had to be modified and adapted—  
often quickly.

Through it all, the Church continues to do God's work,  
seeking to draw all people to Jesus Christ by bearing witness  
to his death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins.

The Church's mission, carried out in the difficult circumstances of this year,  
is emblematic of the two-hundred-year history of the Diocese of Richmond.

It's never been easy for the Church in Virginia.

Pope Pius VII founded the diocese in order to heal a schism,  
meaning a formal division among believers,  
that had arisen in Norfolk.

The schism eventually died of its own accord,  
but there were insufficient resources,  
and so the first bishop of Richmond, Patrick Kelly,  
opened a school to support himself.

It was clear that the diocese had been created prematurely,  
 so Bishop Kelly returned to his native Ireland,  
 and for the next nineteen years the archbishops of Baltimore administered  
 the Diocese of Richmond (1822–1841).

Then there were the chronic challenges of Catholics being spread out  
 in a vast territory,  
 a shortage of priests, and insufficient resources;  
 the cataclysm of the Civil War (1861–1865) and other conflicts;  
 and the social ills of racism and religious bigotry.

There have even been plagues: several outbreaks of yellow fever  
 (1821, 1826, 1855), and the Spanish flu (1918–1920).

## II.

The First and Second Readings tell us that the history of our diocese,  
 and our individual lives, are part of God’s plan,  
 which is still unfolding.

God says through the prophet Isaiah:

“Just as from the heavens  
 the rain and snow come down  
 and do not return there  
 till they have watered the earth...  
 so shall my word be  
 that goes forth from my mouth;  
 my word shall not return to me void,  
 but shall do my will,  
 achieving the end for which I sent it.”

The Lord will do what he promises,  
 although it’s according to his timetable and not our expectations.

The fulfillment of the divine plan is God’s revealing himself in history.

His purpose is to save humanity and to renew the entire universe.

According to St. Paul in the Second Reading,

“Creation awaits with eager expectation  
the revelation of the children of God;  
for creation was made subject to futility...  
in hope that creation itself  
would be set free from slavery to corruption  
and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

God acts in the rough and tumble of real life:  
joy, prosperity, and accomplishment,  
but also hardship, tragedy, and travesty.

So, God’s plan takes twists and turns as it overcomes sin and heals humanity.

St. Paul is clear that the completion of God’s design is not a stroll on Easy Street,  
but that the arduous trek is worth the destination:

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing  
compared with the glory to be revealed for us.”

There is a gap between God’s providence and our expectation.

What fills that gap is God’s sustaining grace and human perseverance.

St. Paul affirms that the Holy Spirit is present and at work in us,  
as we wait for the completion of the divine plan:

“We ourselves,  
who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,  
we also groan within ourselves  
as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

When it comes to perseverance,  
there have been countless, unknown souls who made sacrifices  
for the Catholic faith in Virginia.

We are here today, marking the bicentennial jubilee of our local Church,  
because of their perseverance.

In the Virginia, as in the Gospel parable,  
the seed of the Gospel has been sown in all different types of soil:  
the path, rocky ground, thorns, and rich soil.

Over the course of two hundred years,  
the diocese has had triumphs and failures, and ultimately modest growth.

The key is that the Church is still here.

We had a beautiful reminder of that truth yesterday,

Two men were ordained to the priesthood and one to the transitional diaconate.

Here, at the altar,  
the Eucharist forms the Church as a communion:  
bonds that unite us to God and to one another.

That communion enables us to carry out our mission,  
until God's plan comes to completion.

Those who went before us sowed seeds of Catholic faith that we are harvesting.

We can leave a legacy of holiness forever.