

## Finding Christ at St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church

Robert A. Rees

“Lord, it is good for us to be here.”  
--Peter to Christ on the Mount of  
Transfiguration (Matthew 17:4)

“Called by God, to be in a holy place  
where love is found, where all are  
named and where hearts are freed to  
change the world.”  
--Motto of St. Thomas the Apostle  
Episcopal Church, Hollywood,  
California

As I have thought recently about my experience in ministering to gay and lesbian Latter-day Saints over the past several decades, three refrains keep coming to me. One is the title of the old spiritual, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child”; another is a line from Robert Frost’s “The Death of the Hired Man”: “Home is where, when you have to go there,/they have to take you in”<sup>1</sup>; and the third is from the Book of Mormon: “The keeper of the gate is the Holy One of Israel; and he employeth no servant there” (2 Nephi 9:41).

I believe many homosexuals feel not only like motherless but also like churchless children, and many of them hope for both earthly and heavenly homes where they will be welcomed with love. It is reassuring that the keeper of the gate for the final home we all will enter is the Savior of the world himself. In the meantime, we are all keepers of our own hearts and homes (and churches) and we are responsible for nurturing all who seek fellowship and refuge there.

During the years I served as bishop of the Los Angeles First (Singles’) ward (1986-1992), I encountered a number of Latter-day Saint homosexuals who experienced a great absence in their souls because, in spite of deep and abiding ties to Mormonism, they no longer had close relationship with the Church that had once been an indispensable part of their spiritual lives. For many, their estrangement had been of long and painful duration. For some, the separation between them and their church (and often their families as well) began when they were still quite young and first realized that they were attracted to members of their own gender. In most cases their estrangement evolved over many years and even decades as they endured loneliness, rejection, hostility and at times even abuse and violence. For many, separation from the Church of their heritage has been the most wrenching and painful experience of their lives. It is perhaps not surprising to find the majority of homosexual Latter-day Saints over the age

of thirty not only inactive but alienated from the Church.

Unfortunately, once such individuals separate themselves from the Church, they tend not to associate themselves with other churches or faith traditions. This is confirmed by a survey conducted by the Metropolitan Community Church of Salt Lake City. In response to a question asked of homosexuals who identified themselves as Latter-Day Saints—“Are you actively attending any church?”—ninety-one percent responded in the negative. While not a scientific survey, this does indicate a pattern for Latter-day Saints who identify themselves as having same-sex attraction. This is also confirmed by my experience as bishop and since: when gay and lesbian Latter-day Saints make a break with the Church, they often make a break with all religious life. Out of hurt, confusion, or a spirit of rebellion, they sever ties with all organized religion and sometimes with the entire realm of the spiritual. Many who once spoke to God in their daily devotions cease speaking or listening to Him at all. Many who could at one time testify of the divinity of Christ, no longer keep him in their lives in any meaningful way. For many such individuals, Mormonism is such a deep part of their identity that they find difficulty connecting with another religious tradition.

As bishop, I encouraged the homosexuals in my congregation and of my acquaintance to return to the Church. And, I encouraged the members to open their hearts to them and make them welcome. Some of my experiences with these saints remain among the most sacred of my life, especially presiding over the restoration of blessings, including returning to the temple. For those who were not yet ready to return to the Church, I encouraged them to find a spiritual community where they could find fellowship, worship God and serve others. The following is an account of a group of Latter-day Saint homosexuals who have found such a spiritual home.

I have known David Ballyntine<sup>2</sup> since the time I served as bishop. He comes from a prominent Salt Lake family, one that has a strong pioneer heritage and deep roots in the Restoration. He grew up in the Church and, like most homosexuals of his generation, struggled over the years to find accommodation between his sexual orientation and the Church. When it came time for him to serve a mission, he felt that to be completely honest, he needed to tell the general authority who interviewed him of his sexual orientation. He reports that the authority, without looking up from the desk where he was signing papers, said, “Elder: I would rather you had told me that you were dying of cancer tomorrow than that you are homosexual.” David served an honourable mission to South America but came close to having a mental break in the mission field. He returned, finished his education, became prominent in his chosen field, and continued to try and resolve the conflict between his identity and his Mormonism.

Not feeling completely at home in his own Church (although he continued attending from time to time) but nevertheless wanting to continue living a Christ-

centered life, David began attending St. Thomas the Apostle Episcopal Church in Hollywood. In many ways, St. Thomas may seem like an unusual home for a Latter-day Saint. Its “high church” service, which reflects the “rich liturgical tradition” of Anglo-Catholicism, is dramatically different from the “low church” plain style of the Latter-day Saint tradition. And yet, on the Sunday I worshipped there with David, I was struck by how Christ-centered St. Thomas Church is, not only in its central focus on the life and mission of the Savior but also by showing “great respect . . . for the living message of social justice proclaimed by Jesus Christ.”

On Sunday, February 25, 2001, I met David at St. Thomas’s. Once there, I was surprised to discover that six members of the congregation were gay Latter-day Saints, all of whom had served faithful missions for the Church. They included the lay leader of the congregation, the organist, the designer and builder of the organ, and three other members.

Having worked with a number of gay and lesbian Latter-day Saints who, upon their separation from the Church, found no spiritual home elsewhere, I was immensely grateful to the St. Thomas congregation for welcoming these Latter-day Saints into their church family. I was also aware of how much the spiritual preparation of these Latter-day Saints, including their service as missionaries in various parts of the world (including Japan, France, Germany, and Peru), was contributing to the spiritual life of St. Thomas.

I attended St. Thomas during Lent, the forty-day liturgical season between Ash Wednesday and Easter celebrated by most Christians. Lent symbolizes the forty days Christ spent in the desert preparing for his atonement and crucifixion. As such, it is a time of repentance, prayer, self-denial and alms giving. The primary function of Lent is to prepare Christians spiritually for the events of Holy Week, culminating in remembering the Atonement and celebrating the Resurrection.

The Sunday I attended was the last Sunday following the Feast of the Epiphany, the holy day marking the revelation of Christ to the Magi. This day also marks the revelation of Christ to his disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, bringing together these two dramatic manifestations of God’s glory through his Son.

As I worshipped that day with David and my other Latter-day Saint brothers, I was deeply touched by how everything in the service centered our lives on the Savior. Although the service included many elements not part of my usual worship experience, everything was meaningful—the organ music (played by a returned LDS missionary), hymns (sung by the choir and congregation), readings from the scriptures and the Book of Common Prayer and a sermon (delivered by The Reverend Fr. Loren Ruby, the Interim Pastor). Through such devotional expressions, I found myself thinking much more deeply about the events of Christ’s last week and of their relationship to me.

Feeling the depth of these expressions, I paid particular attention to Fr. Ruby's sermon, which was on the transfiguration of Christ as recounted in Luke 9:28-36. Fr. Ruby spoke of what a defining moment this was for Jesus' disciples, Peter, James and John, who, as they would six months later in the Garden of Gethsemane, slept while Jesus prayed to the Father and then awoke in time to see the transfigured Christ, whose "face did shine as the sun, and [whose] raiment was white as the light" (Matt. 17:2). Fr. Ruby asked the congregation if we too might have been asleep and "might have missed the experience of God" in our midst. And if we were awake enough to see the light "shining from Christ's face," would we "have wanted to tame that light, to institutionalize it, to reduce it, to put it in a box, or to let it shine through us?"

Then speaking as if he might have been a Latter-day Saint discoursing on the Light of Christ, Fr. Ruby said, "The light that shines off Jesus suffuses everything and everyone. The light that shines from the face of Christ shines from all the faces around." I looked at David's face and saw that light, as I saw it on the faces of others in the congregation that day, and I hoped that it shone from my face as well. He added, "We can let that light shine so that the world through our transfiguration can be transfigured. . . . The transfiguring power of God is not something just to be amazed at, but a gift given to us. This is our birthright--to let the transfiguring glory of the Lord shine throughout the world. . . . We need only claim it and thank God and say to the world that it is."

Worshipping that last Sunday after Epiphany with David Ballyntine and the other gay Latter-day Saints who had been welcomed into full fellowship at St. Thomas the Apostle Church, I was struck that their devotion to Christ led them find a way to worship and follow him, even if, for whatever reasons, they did not feel they could do so within their own faith tradition; or, perhaps, their experience that day, was heightened by what they understood of Christ through the Restoration, as was mine.

I was also grateful to the ministers and the congregation at St. Thomas church that they had provided a home for these Latter-day Saints, created a space where they could experience the joy and peace of the Kingdom of God. In the apocryphal Gospel of St. Thomas, which is essentially a compilation of supposed saying of Jesus, Jesus says, "If those who lead you say to you: See, the kingdom is in heaven, then the birds of the heaven will go before you; if they say to you: It is in the sea, then the fish will go before you. But the kingdom is within you, and it is outside of you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will know that you are the sons of the living Father."<sup>3</sup> Or as Stephen Mitchell says in [The Gospel According to Jesus](#), "The Kingdom of god is not something that will happen, because it isn't something that *can* happen. It can't appear in a world or a nation; it is a condition that has no plural, but only infinite singulars."<sup>4</sup>

Fr. Ruby had begun his sermon by telling members of the congregation that we should “receive strangers as we would receive Christ and open to them the fullest hospitality.” St. Thomas is a church that welcomes strangers and foreigners. It was one of the first churches in Southern California to open its doors to those infected with HIV-Aids, and for the past twenty-five years has had an “Aids ministry” as well as an outreach to the poor and homeless. As a Latter-day Saint, I was grateful that St. Thomas had welcomed my Mormon brothers, had given them a spiritual home and had blessed them in countless ways. This is what churches are for.

In Traveling Mercies, her personal story of finding Jesus in another church, Anne Lamott tells of finding her way to God out of an atheistic upbringing and a godless world of drug and alcohol abuse by hearing singing from a black church, St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, as she stood across the street in a flea market in Marin, California. This happened at a point in her life when she felt herself “crossing over to the dark side.” For a number of Sundays she simply stood in the doorway and listened to the singing of this small black congregation. Slowly she inched her way into the church. She writes, “Eventually, a few months after I started coming, I took a seat in one of the folding chairs, off by myself. Then the singing enveloped me. It was furry and resonant, coming from everyone’s very heart.”<sup>5</sup>

The effect of her walking into that Church was to give her a light out of the darkness: “Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated.” But, as she had done previously, on this particular Sunday she rushed out of the church before the sermon. A week later she stayed for the entire service, and says, “[One of the songs was] so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.” In reflecting on this experience later, she said, “When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home—which it’s where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in.”<sup>6</sup>

That, among other things, is what churches are for—to create a home for us, to let us in. When they fail to let all of us in, they fail in their fundamental purpose, which is to make it possible for us to experience the love of God and the love of others in deep, intimate ways and, therefore, to feel enough love for our selves that we can allow the grace of God to work its miracle in our lives.

Churches are also places for us to love, nurture and serve one another. The scriptures speak of kings being our nursing fathers and queens our nursing

mothers (Isaiah 49:23), but Christ, who presents the image of himself as a mother hen (Matt. 23:37; 3 Nephi 10:4-6), suggests that we are all to be fathers and mothers to one another so that no one need feel like a motherless or fatherless child. I felt the spirit of such surrogate parenting at St. Thomas that Sunday morning, as I feel it every Sunday in my own ward.

As bishop I tried to create an open, welcoming and nurturing spiritual community that I hope was like that I found at St. Thomas Church. I wanted gay and lesbian Latter-day Saints to feel that they could find fellowship in a Mormon congregation regardless of their current standing in the Church or their current commitment to gospel principles. Most gay and lesbian Latter-day Saints with whom I came in contact were cautious and even suspicious about reconnecting with the Church. Most had suffered rejection, discrimination, and even abuse from their families and fellow Church members. Nevertheless, they came, not only from within the boundaries of the Los Angeles Stake, but from many adjoining stakes. For some it was the first time they had been inside a Mormon chapel in many years. And the members of the ward welcomed them with open arms and generous hearts. I hope that those who came felt the love of their fellow saints and experienced the love of God as they participated in worship services, sang the songs of Zion, and, reconnected with their Mormon roots.

What Robert Frost says about home being a “place where, when you have to go there,/They have to take you in” is also true of churches, except I would change the imperative “They have to take you in” to “They want to take you in.” That is what the gospel of Christ teaches us to do and it is, after all, what we ultimately hope for when we return to our heavenly home.

I was struck in a recent reading of Matthew by the simplicity and power of Jesus’ Parable of the Lost Sheep:

How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. (Matthew 18:12-13)

More in the one than in the ninety and nine. More in the gay brother or lesbian sister who comes back to church than in all the rest of us who sit there faithfully every Sunday! That’s a perspective to ponder. And then Jesus says this remarkable thing: “Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish” affirming Nephi’s declaration that “All are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33). That is, it is God’s will that all of us, those who go astray (and to some extent we all do) and those who do not, be loved with the tenderness of the Shepherd seeking a lost lamb.

It is, I believe, our Christian-Mormon responsibility to make our houses of

worship safe and nurturing places for all. I truly believe that if we are less judgmental, more generous in care and compassion, more graceful in forgiveness, and more inclusive in loving, many of our gay brothers and sisters would risk coming back to their church to find Christ.

Recently I attended some remarkable meetings in the Oakland, California stake where such a space for homosexuals is being created by an inspired stake leadership. The stake presidency presented a seminar in every congregation to both educate members about the nature of same-sex attraction and to remind them of their Christian duty toward homosexuals. That training included the following specific challenges to members:

- Embrace Church members who have openly homosexual children, parents, siblings.
- Create an atmosphere of trust and respect in which homosexual members will find respect, love and acceptance. Be mindful of the tone and vocabulary we use both in Sunday worship services and in casual conversations.
  - We should not use demeaning, hurtful language in our priesthood lessons or our Relief Society meetings or anywhere else—things like calling homosexual people “evil,” “abominable,” “disgusting,” depraved.” The person sitting next to you or in aisle across from you might be such a homosexual person or the mother or father of gay child.<sup>7</sup>
  - We should not tolerate the use of such language by our children but should instead teach them the principles we have been discussing today.
  - We should teach our children and the youth we are called to lead in the Church that is wrong to tease or humiliate or demean anyone because he or she appears to be or is homosexual.
  - Remember that homosexual feelings generally are unbidden and do not disqualify anyone from full participation in the Church, including holding responsible Church callings.
- Families [should] actively seek opportunities to bring single adult members of the Church (of whatever sexual orientation) into the orbs of our friendship and family lives.
- Create a “safe place” in our Wards and in the Oakland Stake.
  - Create an atmosphere in which members can feel safe (in appropriate adult settings) to share information about their own sexual orientation and/or the sexual orientation of family members and/or close friends.
  - At the same time, respect the desire of [those] homosexual members and their families [who wish] to keep this aspect of

their lives private.

- Homosexuals are your neighbours, your co-workers and your family members. Many may not be open or comfortable disclosing they are homosexual. Most of these people have the same or very similar goals, ambitions, dreams and values in life as heterosexual members of the Church and many strive to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ in the best way they know how.
- In short, create an atmosphere of meaning and hope for homosexual members of the Church, their families and friends.

I believe that were we to act on these principles we would make it more possible for our homosexual brothers and sisters to find Christ in our midst.

As I said at the outset, as a bishop (and in various callings I have had since, including serving in a full-time mission presidency), I have encouraged gay and lesbian members to stay committed to the Church and to enjoy the full blessings of the restored gospel. I have also sought out and encouraged those who are estranged from the Church to return and enjoy the fellowship of the saints. I have given many blessings to that effect and been privileged to witness their fulfilment. I was grateful to David for letting me into his church, for inviting me to worship with him and other Latter-day Saints at St. Thomas. As I sat in this church among other believers of a different tradition, I felt at one with them. As I sang the hymns, listened to the prayers and scriptures, as I reflected on Fr. Ruby's sermon on the transfiguration of the Lord and of our promised transfiguration through him, I felt to exclaim, as the reading from Psalms for the last Sunday after Epiphany says, "Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God and worship him upon his holy hill; for the Lord our God is the Holy One" (Psalm 99). And, he is the only keeper of the gate.



<sup>1</sup> The Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 53.

<sup>2</sup> I use a pseudonym to protect “David’s” privacy.

<sup>3</sup> Gospel of Thomas, Saying 3, the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, trans. Beate Blatz (<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/thomas/cgi-bin/search.php?q=manifest>; accessed 31 March 2008).

<sup>4</sup> (New York: Harper, 1991), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (New York: Pantheon, 1999), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Traveling Mercies, 100.

<sup>7</sup> [footnote from the Oakland Stake material] “Listen to this letter that Elder Oaks quoted in a 1995 *Ensign* article. This letter was written by the parents of a gay child. Elder Oaks’ point in quoting the letter was that it raises an important concern and illustrates ways in which we need to be careful how we communicate about this subject. ‘Another concern we have is the way in which our sons and daughters are classified as people who practice deviant and lascivious behavior. Perhaps some do, but most do not. These young men and women want only to survive, have a spiritual life, and stay close to their families and the Church. It is especially damaging when these negative references are spoken from the pulpit. We believe such talks only create more depression and a tremendous amount of guilt, shame, and lack of self-worth, which they have endured throughout their entire lives. There is sometimes a real lack of the pure love of Christ expressed to help them through their ordeals. We will all appreciate anything you can do to help with the plight of these much misunderstood children of our Father in Heaven. If some of the General Authorities could express more sensitivity to this problem, it would surely help to avoid suicides and schisms that are caused within families. Many simply cannot tolerate the fact that Church members judge them as ‘evil people,’ and they, therefore, find solace in gay-oriented lifestyles.’”