

## ST. LAWRENCE, DEACON AND MARTYR

LPC, 8/4/16

Happy St. Lawrence Day! St. Lawrence is the patron saint of this church. There is no deep reason for this. St. Lawrence was not named as our patron from the beginning. Lawrencefield Chapel took its name from the farm on which it was built. I assume the name Lawrence had particular significance to the Paull family, who owned the property and were the initial sponsors of the original Sunday School, and the worshipping community that grew out of it.

I doubt that St. Lawrence himself occurred to those stout Anglican Christians of mid-century. Lawrence is a decidedly Roman saint, you see. He lived and died in Rome during the waning years of the Roman Empire. This must be the reason he is much more popular in the Roman Catholic Church than in the Episcopal Church. During an informal Google search, I found only one St. Lawrence Episcopal Church, which by the way is located in Libertyville, IL. Whereas I found St. Lawrence Catholic Churches in Virginia, Maryland, California, Kentucky and North Carolina before I lost interest.

No, adopting St. Lawrence as our patron is a relatively recent phenomenon, and occurred sort of by fiat, when some time in the last ten years I convinced the vestry that having a patron saint would give us another excuse to have a party and/ or raise money. The decision to adopt St. Lawrence was embraced with particular joy by John Taylor of blessed memory, a dedicated Anglican who served as our liturgist at the 8:00 service until his death, and who relished praying each week for “St. Lawrence our patron.”

Now, adopting St. Lawrence turned out to be a happy and blessed decision for Lawrencefield, and not just because our name sounds like his name. For one thing, St. Lawrence has a really great story, which I will proceed to tell you even though most of you have heard it many times before. After all, we tell the Christmas story at Christmas every year, even though you all know it already.

Lawrence was one of seven deacons serving the papacy when Valerian, who was very unfriendly to the Christian movement, became emperor. Pope and deacons were arrested, and all but Lawrence were put to death at once. Lawrence was kept alive because he was the treasurer of the church. The Roman prefect wanted the treasure, so Lawrence was told to go fetch it. Lawrence returned with an assembly of the city’s poor, proclaiming them the treasure of the church. His insolence earned him a particularly gruesome martyrdom: he was grilled alive on a gridiron. Maintaining his aplomb to the end, Lawrence reportedly told his executioner, “Turn me over, I’m done on this side.”

Based on this legend, Lawrence became known as the patron saint of cooks, librarians and comedians. These credentials were awarded for obvious reasons. Lawrence is patron to cooks, because he himself was cooked. He is patron to librarians, because he, like librarians, was trusted with the stewardship and care of a “library” of valued possessions, including, according to legend, the Holy Grail. And he is patron of comedians, I suppose, because he

clearly had a comic presence, presenting the poor as the treasure of the church and, of course, tossing out that comment about being done even in extremis, as I'm sure you can appreciate.

This is another reason why St. Lawrence was such a happy choice for us. We are a congregation of cooks, keepers and comedians. Cooking, keeping and humor could even be said to be Lawrencefield's particular charisms, or our giftedness.

Come to Coffee Hour and you see what gifted cooks we are. Better yet, come to one of our covered dish suppers, where there is always enough food for roughly five or six times the number of people who show up. We also make cooking part of our outreach ministry, serving at the St. Luke's Soup Kitchen once a month.

We are also good stewards, or keepers, preserving our Episcopal heritage in liturgy, polity and tradition, while, I trust, being open to the best of what the present day has to offer.

Best of all, we don't think of ourselves too seriously. Honestly, I think one of the reasons people come here rather than a larger church is because we have a bit more freedom to be ourselves here than in a landmark church or cardinal parish that has to worry about always preserving its dignity. Our vestry meetings are filled with laughter. People smile here.

In short, Lawrencefield to a large extent lives into the legacy of our patron saint, Lawrence.

The reason we celebrate St. Lawrence during the second week of August every year, however, is not just so we can party or fundraise, or congratulate ourselves for living into Laurentian virtues. We remember St. Lawrence to be challenged by the example of his extraordinary faith.

Lawrence did everything that we remember him for in the single-minded service of God. He was faithful unto death. He was true to his belief in Jesus. This showed in his surpassing dedication to the poor, whom he served in Jesus' name. He showed imagination in performing his duty, recognizing that preserving the physical treasure of the church would be pointless, with the Pope dead, if no one witnessed to the Gospel. And this Lawrence did, presenting the poor as the treasure of the church.

And that flip little comment, "I'm done on this side." With self-deprecating humor, even as he was totally humiliated and subjugated, did Lawrence show up the hollowness of the empire's dependence of violence and persecution. Even in the direst straits, Lawrence demonstrated that he was still a free man. Liberated in the Gospel, born to eternal life, even physical torture and death could not deprive him of the dignity and hope bestowed upon him as a child of God.

Lawrence's lessons are many: Do everything in the single-minded service of God. Care for the poor in Jesus' name. The physical treasures of the church are worth nothing if no one witnesses to the Gospel. Don't expect that your faithfulness to the Gospel is going to make life easy for you. But know that your strength, your freedom, your victory, is in Jesus Christ, and no one can take that from you, ever.