

**The 27th Convention of the Episcopal Diocese of El Camino Real**  
**October, 26, 2007**  
**Sermon: Bishop-Elect Mary Gray-Reeves**

I am from Florida, as most of you know, and while I have lived in Southern CA, and New Zealand, as with us all, my growing-up years were times of great influence and molding. We simply can't help but be impacted by our culture, our geography. The landscape of place and events are part of who we are, our foundation in life.

My childhood memories are of muggy days, little clothing, bare feet, swimming in pools, oceans, lakes and canals, tree-climbing, warm rain and loud crashing thunder and lightening. Even scary thunder storms were great. My brother George would comfort me, and say, "Oh Mary, don't worry – that loud crashing noise is just the angels bowling! One day when we go to heaven, we will get to bowl with them!"

I have joyful memories of growing up in Florida; but likewise my first memory of fear came, sitting in our dark, enclosed house during a hurricane, watching the storm shutters rip off from our living room window. I felt vulnerable and subject to the fury of the elements that in lesser form, brought so much carefree fun. Such strength in wind and water taught me to be respectful of the elements and to remember, that no matter how strong one's house was, we were, after all, still living on a sandbar. A firm sandbar, with a coral bed a few feet below the surface, known as the Biscayne Aquifer, a natural system of rain and fresh water storage that helps provide the water supply for those living there – and that is as solid as rock – but nonetheless, a sandbar. Water could rush in over that sandy rock, do its damage, and then rush back out to the ocean once again. When one builds near the coastline especially, one sinks the foundation into that coral bed and it is quite sturdy. But everyone knows that a furious storm – say the likes of Andrew, Katrina, Mitch, Dean, - can wash a house out to sea, pluck it up and drop it elsewhere, or just shred it into nothingness. After Andrew, with South Florida so flat, there were areas where all the street signs, landmarks, and anything resembling familiarity were simply gone. People could not find their way around with just bare foundations and the cement grid of streets criss-crossing across that desolate, flat sandbar. They were totally disoriented – they did not recognize their landscape.

This reality makes me a bit skeptical of Jesus' words; if you build the right foundation, then the house will sustain what nature has to offer. This is not always true in our human experience. Sometimes the foundation is fine but the house is just gone, sometimes it is covered in water and rendered useless. Foundation and house can get disconnected, no matter how strongly the first is built. Here in earthquake country, I am not telling you anything you do not know. Liquefaction, split foundations, collapsed freeways; we know what it is to have the ground move underneath us and even slip away. Indeed, not only can foundation and house get separated from one another, the foundation itself can crack in two, and be rendered useless. One is humbled by such realities.

In our gospel, Jesus is speaking in metaphor. So we will let the metaphor do its work. Jesus wants us to build our “house”, our lives, on a life with God. Jesus is the foundation. And as we are one with Christ, He in us and we in Him, we are a part of that foundation. It is only normal that in a responsibly lived life with God, that our understanding of God and our relationship with Him will change. That is just normal. And while Jesus is solid as a rock, we, even in our oneness with Him, can get a bit shifty or shaky, and cracks, fissures, compromises may appear in our foundation. Now it is really alright, since all of this happens in God – who is very, very big. Instead of getting judgmental about such imperfections, it is best to take them as they come, and repair – or rather, allow God to heal them – as only God can. This also is a humbling reality – not just our physical house can be tossed off its foundation, but that of our very souls. And it all happens in God.

A nuclear scientist friend said to me once, “what will you do when the very source of the universe is discovered? What will happen to God?” There was an assumptive posture in this devout Roman Catholic, nuclear scientist’s question: “not if, but when” the very basic origin of the universe is discovered: what then? Won’t that create a faith crisis? A falling of your spiritual house, a break in your foundation? Certainly we have all had faith crises of one sort or another; they are a normal part of our walk with Jesus. If you are not stumbling at least occasionally, you may not be growing.

I had a spiritual crisis that lasted a couple of months and finished up about this time last year. In retrospect I can see that it was related to the discernment process of bringing us together, but at the time, I could not really tell which way was up. The house was crumbling and I was unsure if there was a foundation at all under my spiritual feet. The details of that “dark night of the soul” are this. In the summer of ’06, my family and I traveled through Utah. If you want to get in touch with the vastness of the universe, go to Utah. The geological record is so in-your-face, you cannot help but consider God as creator, and experience what an absolutely tiny speck anyone of us is, in the vastness of divine time and space. While we were exploring Dinosaur National Monument, we came to a place where dinosaurs had gathered at a trickle of water for a last gasp of life. There was a drought, and they all eventually lay down and died. Their dry bones tell their story. I thought, “is that it?! As we deal with all our global warming or cooling, and rent destruction upon ourselves, are we also just to lie down and die?” And I suddenly became acutely aware of God’s absence. I did not doubt God as creator or that God existed or was around – somewhere - but I, me, I got lost in the bigness of God. Now, as all this began, I thought, “I don’t believe in God’s absence – that is NOT a part of my theological foundation. God’s absence is not the foundation on which my house is built, thank you very much.” I believe in fact, that we can never be separated from the Love of God, as Paul reminds us Romans 8. And for a little while, I simply rejected my experience as false. After a few weeks, however, I could not deny that something was happening; that my thinking, my foundation was revealing some imperfections and could possibly undergo some repair – or rather, healing. There was perhaps a crack or two in something I thought was quite solid and storm-worthy. I finally relented and said, “I am not quite sure what is going on here, but I will wait for you to let me know.” And

intellectually, in my thinking, I knew Jesus was present, but I just couldn't feel Him under my feet. Thankfully I was able to wait patiently and not get too panicked. While I didn't know what or why this was happening, I knew there was purpose in this restructuring; something was being shifted, rebuilt at the foundation level. Then the dark night lifted and God quite gently said to me, "If you could loosen your grip on your vocation, that would help me out a lot. I can't imagine it is much fun and I know you think you have it all under control, but trust me, it isn't going to work very well if we do it your way." About two weeks after light filled my soul again, not one, but two people – unrelated to one another - called to tell me they had nominated me for bishop of this diocese. My defenses were very immediate; the search committee can tell you how many times I said I was dropping out! But the very real experience of that dark night reflected back to me my arrogance in taking God's abundant, graceful, deep, life-giving presence for granted, selfishly, for what I wanted and what I believed, creating MY foundation for ME, unevenly shaping and creating, rather than being shaped and created. "Why do you call me Lord, and not do what I tell you?" as Luke's gospel challenges today.

I think Jesus' words, let us know that the building won't make it, if the foundation is not sure and solid. And sometimes the foundation itself may need a bit of work too – mine did – yours has – and together, ours will. Jesus gives all sorts of examples throughout chapter six of Luke's gospel of ways in which people's thinking needs to shift – ways in which their foundation maybe needs to be inspected, strengthened, even altogether changed!

So, El Camino Real, you are not the only ones to have had a big, fat faith-crisis as we come to this most exciting, very intriguing, obvious cross-roads.

After Hurricane Dean hit Honduras this summer, I asked Bishop Frade, who was bishop in Honduras before Southeast Florida, "Dean will not get the press of Mitch (which hit in 1998) – how will the people survive?" He said, "they are used to rebuilding and they will just do it."

Sometimes we think we are having a faith crisis simply because we have to rebuild. Especially as Americans, we can become so sure that everything we build is perfect the first time, how can it possibly need rebuilding? How can there possibly be a crack in the foundation that is so solid? It is the arrogance of many characters in the text of Luke's gospel, and it is our own. How arrogant it was of me to say to God, "I have already discerned MY vocation, I don't need to do any work on that again!" We are dealing with the immeasurable, eternal, never-ending breadth, height, width, depth – very big being of God. It might just be that in the reality of that hugeness, we may have to, at the very least, tweak our spiritual foundation here and there, a little, ever so slightly. Let us not be so self-assured that we think our ground is so solid it cannot be shaken, and that we know everything there is to know about the construction that lies ahead. I think we need to take a lead from our Honduran friends, and think of our selves as rebuilders, recreators.

We will be debating and Lord, I pray, passing the Constitution and Canons of our diocese. I am very grateful to all of you who have worked so hard in crafting, debating and clarifying. It is a piece of the foundation of the ministry of this diocese, and the work has been done well. As near as I can tell, there are no great fissures, weaknesses or dangers in the Constitutions and Canons before us, that we need to deal with right this minute. We can build on them. We may discover, as we begin building, places where they need tweaking, filling in, shoring up. The beauty of the freedom, grace and guidance we know in Jesus – and in our democratic form of being church – is that we can tweak and shore up the foundation as needed. We don't have to wait for a crisis – or make one – in order to do that. After all, these documents, brilliant as they are, are not perfect. Our foundation will never be perfect – our faith lives are imperfect, they have fissures and cracks, and sometimes we get beat up in the storms of life. But we can rebuild – indeed, this should be our mindset and attitude. Let's begin, and repair as we go. Let's gracefully, make that a lifestyle.

Finally, the key to being led, knowing how Jesus wants us to strongly build both foundation and house, is to listen and act. “Why do you call me Lord, and not do what I tell you?” The relationship we have with God in Jesus is not just of our talking, telling Jesus what we want, but of listening to what God wants. Listening requires being present to the Presence. The more we practice it, the better listeners we are. We can even hear the powerful silence of God, and when those times come, we can be sure that those times are also purposeful.

Finally, listening is a spiritual skill. Our spiritual skills help us build – they are the way we know God's construction within us. We are listening now. You can feel it in the room – we are knowing Jesus now. This is our foundation for the rebuilding we will be called to do. Let us listen and act, listen and act.