

## "The Window at King's Chapel"

A SERMON PREACHED BY  
THE REV. CARL SCOVEL, MINISTER  
KING'S CHAPEL, BOSTON

13 April, 1986

In 1863 John Amory Lowell, Boston merchant and banker, at the age of 66 took the last of several trips to Europe. He had grown up in this church and been a Vestryman for 14 years and Jr. Warden for two. He sat in Pew No. 36 against the School Street wall and from that view looked at the chancel which may have seemed to him a little bare, a little cold, a little too Puritan for a church with an Anglican past. Still, Lowell was not one to move precipitously. When the Proprietors of Pews met in 1861, and Samuel Russell moved that the three center windows in the chancel be set with colored glass, it was John Lowell who moved that the subject be indefinitely postponed.

But he must have had a change of heart as well as the measurements to the windows when he left for Europe, for when he arrived in Munich, he went to the offices of the Koenigliche Glasmalerei (the Royal Glasspainters) where he ordered painted windows for the chancel windows in his beloved Boston church.

Early in September John Lowell wrote to his minister, Henry Foote: "My dear Sir, I have caused to be painted three windows for the chancel of King's Chapel. I ask leave to present them to the Society in token of the interest which I shall never cease to feel in a church that set the first example in later days of a union of fervent faith with consistent liberality." The Vestry received that letter on October 1 and called a special meeting of the Proprietors for October 11 to act upon John Lowell's offer. The Proprietors voted to accept the windows adding to that vote the following: "We heartily sympathize in the feelings which prompted him to this munificent act and ... offer him our warmest thanks for so remembering our venerable place of worship during his absence from this country."

You will note that the Proprietors did not vote to install the windows; after all no one had yet seen them. A Dr. Dalton reminded the proprietors that many people were still at their summer resorts (on October 11!) and "considering the decided change in the appearance of the chancel which the insertion of colored glass windows would produce suggested that time be allowed for deliberation before deciding to adopt the same." The Proprietors referred to the luckless Vestry the decision as to whether and when to install the windows. The Vestry voted to proceed and they were installed before Christmas Day, 1863. After their light had been tempered with ground glass and linen cloth they were judged a complete success. And there the matter rested for sixty-five years.

You should remember that in the mid-nineteenth century this church interior looked very differently from what it does now. The walls and columns were stained of "some grave color," the ceiling was white washed, and the exteriors of the pews were painted with the same dark oak stain as was the organ case. The floor was carpeted in a dark

floral pattern and the pews upholstered according to the taste of the individual owners. The pulpit, reading desk, choir gallery and communion table were hung with dark crimson damask. The texture of the church was rich, dark and warm. We might have found it gloomy, but to our predecessors this church was home, and like their homes it was richly, darkly, colorfully appointed.

Then, at the turn of this century the Colonial Revival appeared. In 1915 the exterior panels and doors of the pews were painted white, a floor of Vermont slate was laid in the isles and a marble floor in the chancel. In 1916 the Vestry voted to buy a standard cloth to be used to upholster all the pews. They could do this because since 1907 the Trustees owned increasing number of the pews and could pick the cloth for them. In the ensuing years the damask hangings disappeared from pulpit, reading desk, communion table and choir gallery. A chandelier was hung in 1930 and made the sanctuary even brighter. Light and simplicity were the motifs of the Colonial Revival. In such an environment a painted window from the mid-1800's was to have a hard time of it.

At the May 1929 meeting of the Vestry we read among a list of ten suggested improvements: "Put back in place the original shutters covering the windows in the Chancel." No action was taken but at the next Vestry meeting, held in October, the Wardens reported that interior shutters now covered the chancel windows. (A member of the Society had paid for them.)

In February 1930, the Vestry voted that the two side windows representing the two apostles be replaced experimentally by the plain glass windows. The Vestry assured the Society at their Easter Monday meeting in April that this was only an experiment and that everyone would have an opportunity to express him or herself in writing. The clear glass for those windows was found, one set with the Greenfield Historical Society and the other in the possession of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Peter and Paul in the two side windows were dismantled, boxed and stored in the crypt for some time, and no one knows where they are now.

One parishioner, the wife of a former AUA president, protested. She wrote to the Vestry, "Let us now be carried away by our laudable enthusiasm for the restoration of Colonial details in our own houses into thinking all restoration is worthwhile ... Can we believe that plain glass, always dirty in our great city, or wooden shutters ... could convey any sense of vividness and refreshment, much less any sense of religious symbolism?"

A year later (in 1931) the Vestry voted to remove the two small windows on either side of the center window and replace them with clear glass at a cost of \$240. And so it remained for four years. Then in February 1935 the Misses Homan convinced the Advisory Committee to request the Vestry to replace the colored glass in the two small side windows. The Vestry agreed to that request, and the two small windows reappeared.

A former Senior Warden was not pleased with their re-elevation. He wrote to the Vestry, "It was with much regret that I saw the two smaller stained glass windows in the chancel. I am advised that this is temporary and for the purpose of permitting members of the congregation to determine how they like it ... My objection to these windows is that they are ugly ... in the best pre-Hitlerite Teutonic style. They were not originally part of the church ... (Since their removal) they have not improved in appearance."

In April, 1935, after reading much correspondence pro and con the Vestry voted "that the two colored windows temporarily reinstalled on either side of the center window be removed and that the wooden shutters be replaced." This was done and the count then stood: two down and one to go.

The Vestry also voted in April, 1935, to bring in experts to judge the appropriateness of colored glass at King's Chapel.

On April 23 architects Edgar Smith and Joseph Chandler and Boston reputed window-maker, Mr. Charles Connick, came to view the chancel. They studied the windows with and without shutters. They heard the history of the debate and they were, reported the Junior Warden, unanimous in their opinion "that stained glass was inharmonious with the rest of the interior." Mr. Connick's words were the coup d' grace: "Although my business is exclusively in stained glass," he said, "nevertheless it seems to me that such glass is entirely out of place in this church, either in the side windows or in the chancel."

From here on the church wavered back and forth between concealment and exposure. The center window was covered from 1935 to 1937, partially covered in 1937, exposed in 1938, covered in 1939 for the wedding of a daughter of parishioners, who disliked the windows, and exposed in 1941 for a wedding whose parties liked the window, and left exposed until 1950 when it was covered again. In 1952 a poll was taken on the subject of the center window. Seventy-seven parishioners voted to cover the window, sixty-one voted to leave it exposed. It seems that those who disliked the window were a younger group than those who liked it. For, twenty-five years after this vote was taken (that is, in 1977) there were only 9 living of the original 61 who liked the window, but there were 31 living of the original 77 who voted to cover it.

Not until 1964 did the Vestry vote to dispose of the crated glass that had been sitting in the crypt since 1935. In 1965 the Vestry agreed that when economical repairs to the window could no longer be made, the central window should be taken down, provided that the Buildings and Grounds Committee notified the Wardens and Vestry in reasonable time before making its replacement.

When I came to this church in 1967 the windows were covered with dark crimson drapery. In the early 1970's when we repainted the church interior, we replaced the drapes with shutters and thereby gained more light in the chancel. The colored light of the central window shone through the shutters and on sunny mornings it positively glowed upon the congregation. We have a hidden Christ at King's Chapel, not so

well hidden that we do not know that he is there. Yet, not so clearly defined that we cannot imagine him as we would individually see him. We have both the mystery and presence of Christ, a paradox perhaps, and yet appropriate for a Unitarian Universalist congregation that prizes room for differences and avoids too-precise definitions.

The story now comes to this Sunday morning, April 13, 1986, on which we had planned to view the central window. It was rather a shock to me when I arrived at ten o'clock and saw in place of the glowing colors of the Munich glasspainters a large black square with only the outlines of the lead showing the design. I could hardly believe my eyes. After some inquiry among those arriving for the service we learned that three years ago when workmen were touching up the outside trim on the church, they were directed to paint the exterior window behind the chancel window. Needless to say, this was not common knowledge among the clergy or officers of this church. We would hardly have ordered this morning's viewing if we had. But our discovery could not have happened on a more propitious day. This morning's service is followed by our Annual Meeting and I cannot imagine that the subject will not come up for discussion. I remember Mrs. Snow once commenting on the debate over these windows, "Well, we had to have something to argue about."

In the last analysis, however, the real windows in this church are not in the walls of this sanctuary but in the pews. You are the windows onto God for each other. In fact, in the early Christian church you would have been called, all of you, every one of you, "the saints." The congregation in each church were all the saints.

You may have heard of the little boy whose parents took him through a great cathedral with many splendid stained glass windows showing the prophets, martyrs, heroes and heroines of the church. When they got home, his parents asked him if he remembered who the saints were. "Oh yes," he answered, "The saints are the people who let the light shine through." Will the saints please rise and sing together Hymn No. 424.

To thee, Eternal Soul, be praise!  
Who, from of old to our own days  
Thro' souls of saints and prophets, Lord,  
hast sent thy light, thy love, thy word.

We thank thee for each mighty one  
Thro' whom thy living light hath shone;  
And for each humble soul and sweet  
That lights to heav'n our wand'ring feet

\*\*\*\*\*

A postscript to the sermon: Immediately after preaching this sermon I was greeted by a parishioner who told me that some years ago he was walking down Charles Street and heard a junk collector offering boxes

of stained glass windows from King's Chapel for twenty-five dollars each. This parishioner purchased them and informed me that he had stored them in the attic of the Brimmer Street Garage.

At the conclusion of the formal agenda of the Society's annual meeting that followed the service the Senior Warden asked if anyone wished to discuss the matter of the stained glass windows. It was moved, seconded and voted (with one person opposing) that the paint be removed from the exterior protective window so that the light might shine again through the center window.