

Remembering Peter and Anna Cassey of California.

1 Thess 1:1-10, 2:14 – 16

Ps 112

Matt 5:13-16

16 – IX – 2014

Grace Cathedral San Francisco

Good Afternoon Saints

Our scripture this afternoon speaks of call and inspiration to live in the ways of God. The opening of the first letter to the Thessalonians reminds the believers that the message of the Gospel came to them not just in word, but in the power of the Holy Spirit – ‘with full conviction..., in spite of persecution you received the word with Joy.. So you became an example to all the believers’. These new believers, followers of the Jesus away from the his home in Palestine, could only be re assured by St Paul that they have found true faith, and are commended by it. They were the examples that were the best, as the St Matthew wrote: ‘the light that shines before others.’ When I think of the blessed ones of the church, I think of how their lives were living examples of the Jesus to their contemporaries and today.

And today, we remember Peter and Anna Cassey of California.

In 2009 The Episcopal Diocese of California called a task force for a three-year study of the role of the Diocese in the sin of American Slavery. Their study results were inconclusive about a direct relationship of benefice by the Diocese in the American slave trade; the bishop was an abolitionist who forbade discussion of abolition, secession or the Civil War. One result of this research by the Racial Reconciliation Task force was the discovery, or re discovery of the lives of Peter Williams Cassey, deacon, and his wife Anna Bessant Cassey; abolitionists, civil

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rights workers, educators, and, in the case of Peter, the first clergy ordained west of the Mississippi in 1866.

This city of San Francisco, at the tail end of the gold rush, was the wild frontier, with people from around the world seeking the quick riches Cassey came to this town in 1853 from Philadelphia; his parents, Joseph and Amy Cassey of Philadelphia, were friends and close to Absalom Jones, priest and abolitionist, as well as Frederic Douglass and Horace Greeley. His grandfather Peter Cassey was the first black priest of the Diocese of New York and founding vicar of St Phillips Harlem, that great parish on the northern end of Manhattan.

You have in your service booklet a short biography of the Cassey. I'd like to raise up to your attention two points – that San Francisco, the wild down of the west, was split of confederate sympathizers (and that Cassey was a young man who did not readily come to ministry).

San Francisco was a town awash in riches of the Gold Rush, where in the early 1850's gold nuggets were still a form a payment, the abandoned ships in the harbor were used as warehouses, hotels and more, vigilante justice was administered by frontiersmen, and the Fugitive Slave Act was administered here and endangered the freedom freedmen and former slaves alike. Those who saw or read '12 years a slave' would recall the injustices of that law. San Francisco was also split with abolitionists and pro slavery factions, slaves were sold on Montgomery and Market St., and abolition was the cause of the Broderick - Terry Duel. In this town Trinity Church, Grace Church was founded, and Rev William Kip of New York, of abolitionist sentiment, sent to be bishop for the new state.

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What of Cassey, like other ambitious men, he saw the money to be made in the service industry to the miners, and operated a barbershop at the Union Hotel. He was successful and listed in the city directory. He married Anna Bessant, started a family, becoming quite successful in this frontier town of Gold. However the tensions between pro slavery and anti slavery forces made living difficult, and they moved to Portland for a couple of years. When they returned, they became involved with other African Americans in the abolition movement and civil rights, and the education of children of color in California. They co founded the Convention of Colored Citizens, a civil rights activist group. They moved to San Jose, began St Phillips Mission and School, and, at a time when the public education of children were separate and unequal, opened their school as one instructing classical education of all children, drawing students from along the west coast and Latin America. In 1866, Bishop Kip ordained Peter Cassey as Reverend Deacon, for 'work amongst the colored people', which the Bishop commended Cassey. Much of the work of the Cassey 's involved the school, known also at the Phoenixian Institute, running St Phillip Mission, serving Trinity Church San Jose. Cassey remained active in the work of the CCC, being one of the first blacks registered to vote in San Jose. In that way the over scheduled could understand, Bp. Kip called upon Cassey to start another mission, Christ Church in San Francisco. For the Cassey's this meant time apart: Anna Cassey spent her time with the Phoenixian Institute and St Phillip's Mission and Peter Cassey travelled between the two cities, administering both congregations.

The Phoenixian Institute closed in the mid 1870's when San Jose created a public school for children of color. Anna Cassey died in 1875. St Phillip's San Jose continues, however, Christ Church San Francisco eventually closed. Peter Cassey left

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California in 1881 to serve as vicar deacon in New Bern, North Carolina, thence to in Florida until his death in 1917.

The theologian Howard Thurman, another San Franciscan, wrote:

Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.¹

Reflecting on the Cassey's, I think of how the Holy Spirit moved in them. Peter Cassey, the young barber thinking of riches on the Western Frontier, became alive when he did the work of the Holy Spirit in California; together with his wife Anna educating the young and marginalizes, spreading the Gospel by founding missions. They became alive with Joy, brought by word and action to be the light of Christ in this world, in this place on the Western Frontier.

And that is what I ask of us, on this beautiful autumn day. Be Alive, with Joy. A chance to do that what makes us come alive. Those called to research slavery in the Diocese of California found these abolitionists and civil rights workers in the back page of history, and brought them forward. May we be inspired like Peter and Anna Casey, brought alive with joy to be willing worker of God's own loved world.

Amen

¹ Howard Thurman, the Living Wisdom of Howard Thurman