

JAMES PARKS MORTON

Remarks at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine

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James Carroll

Jim loved birds. And he honored you and all his people by referring to you as his birds. "Hey, Bird Man!" he would cry in greeting. "What do you know?" If you were a woman; "Hello, Bird" - a pure endearment.

Jim's first birds, by his own account, were his daughters: the late, beloved Hillary, Polly, Sophia, and Maria. And, of course, Pam - his bird partner. A pair of exquisitely matched flyers, Jim and Pam flew through a

life together, taking turns in the lead. Landing here for those crucial years.

Early in his time as Dean, Jim arranged with the Bronx Zoo to make a home here on the Close for three peacocks, and now, generations later, three peacocks still roam the grounds - one of them named for Jim. How he loved handing out found peacock feathers. Why?

Because, as Emily Dickenson wrote - Jim honored her in the Poet's Cortner he established over there - "Hope is the thing with feathers."

Why else were parrots a feature of Jim's office? Especially "Sidibou" whose squawking interrupted many a solemn fundraising pitch. Why else was his favorite flower the "Bird of Paradise," whose very name

underscored Jim's retrieval of the medieval purpose of a Cathedral - to be a foretaste of paradise.

Paradise defined how? By beauty, of course. The arts, music, poetry, drama, dance, the high-wire walk - the litany of this place's geniuses you know so well - all Jim's "birds" of paradise.

And, of course, the beauty of this great structure itself.

When Jim arrived as Dean in 1972, the Cathedral had been stalled since World War II. Some said resuming the building of this great edifice, considering costs, was an offense against justice. But Jim Morton arrived here as a well known prophet of justice, reflected in his immediate response to New York's homelessness crisis. He said, "Decent housing is a human right!"

But in saying "We build again!," he was pronouncing "Beauty as a human right!" And this beauty belongs to everyone, to all of God's people, whom he called his "Birds."

"Hey, Birdman," he'd call to the Harlem bred stone-carvers. "Hey Birdman," he'd call to organizers of his Homesteading Board, as they closed in on the purchase hundreds of buildings for the homeless. By affirming beauty and justice at once - in an era when a Cathedral symbolized social inequity and religious power - it is not too much to say that Jim rescued the very idea of sacred space in America.

What else was his invention of the St. Francis Day Celebration of Blessing but a celebration of ALL of God's creatures, including "Pepe," the Morton family's own

Welsh Corgie. Maria thinks of her Dad at the great door, with a garland necklace of flowers, welcoming an elephant of the Big Apple Circus - the circus, too, an image of paradise. Jim Morton, as my wife Lexa said, made religion fun!

But also—-also - the Francis festival of God's creation brought the urgent crisis of environmental degradation inside the Church: this church, ultimately inside many churches. That made Jim notorious as, or honored as, the "Green Dean" - and it made St. Francis Day itself nothing less than a blessing of the beleaguered Earth at churches all over America.

Paradise, I said. But, in the “Gospel according to Jim,” what is paradise like? The readings we just heard suggest an answer.

Isaiah: “ALL nations streaming into it” - what we just saw in the entrance procession of all you religious leaders;

The Book of the Revelation of St. John the Divine: “Great multitudes from every tribe, people, and language;” - what we just heard in Hebrew and Arabic readings;

The Gospel of John: “Many dwelling places in the Father's House” - dwelling places for all.

For Jim Morton, those images were not of some afterlife but of his own ministry. He was a prophet of pluralism. *There is more than one way to God!* That was a

Christian heresy not long ago. Jim Morton preached it from every stone in the Cathedral.

Therefore - that great diversity of voices heard from this pulpit - another litany of great figures well known to you. Jim remade the Church, which - Protestant and Catholic alike - had defined itself around the word "No" into the sanctuary of the word "Yes!"

Once, as Polly remembers, a group of practitioners of Oomoto, a Japanese religion derived from Shinto, appeared on the steps of the Cathedral. They asked to perform their sacred tea ceremony on the high altar, and Jim said, "Wonderful! Yes!" That led to a profound spiritual and artistic exchange with Japan - and to Polly's own profound vocation.

The word "Yes" hardly said it for Jim.

"Wonderful! Gorgeous! Marvelous!" He said such words to all of you. He was affirmation itself. HE was the thing with feathers! Oh, and also, as Sophia recalls, he was the thing with a bear's tooth forever worn around his neck. He wore that tooth with vestments, with his tux. He wore it, God forbid, at the Century Club.

What Jim Morton was, this Cathedral became.

How? Why? What drove his unstoppable determination to cross borders and heal divisions?

Of course, there were the innate gifts of the man himself, and there was the Episcopal Church's precious charism for mediation. But there was something else, and it began here.

One of Jim's first great initiatives was the International Symposium on the Holocaust, held across four days in July, 1974. I was privileged to be there.

When Emil Fackenheim, Richard Rubenstein, Alfred Kazin, Irving Greenberg, and Elie Wisel addressed a predominately Christian audience, overflowing the great Gothic space of Synod Hall, it was the first time that Christians heard in depth - from Jews! - what the Jewish experience of the Holocaust had been. We Christians listened and heard. And we began to see.

OF COURSE the Cathedral had stalled during World War Two! The Holocaust was an interruption in history. Why shouldn't this Cathedral have been interrupted? It took that reckoning in 1974 to get going again - the phoenix, speaking of birds, rising out of ashes. That

conference brought the Jewish-Christian dialogue to a new level, and it ignited Jim Morton's ministry. With Rabbis as his most intimate partners from then on, Jim's "Yes" to the Jewish people underwrote his "Yes" to the world

And didn't we see that magnificently in what Jim went on to do after his retirement as Dean? Who could have predicted that his ministry here would rise to a new climax with his founding of The Interfaith Center of New York? With his partner and indispensable successor Chloe Breyer, Jim and his Center gave this city just what was needed after 9/11 - an image of religious mutuality and peace. The Interfaith Center of New York, as Chloe will show us, is Jim's Cathedral brought to the world.

"Marvelous. Wonderful. Gorgeous." Sophia told me that while sitting in the dining room, the week before Jim died, Pam was spooning vanilla ice cream into Jim's mouth. He had long slipped away from language. Yet that day, after one spoonful, and then another, Jim closed his eyes and said, "Gorgeous. Gorgeous." A right "last word," if ever there was one. "Gorgeous."

And that it was said in response to Pam's loving tenderness fulfilled the 65 years of life together that they had just then celebrated.

Jim loved birds. One in particular. He and I shared its story in this space many years ago.

In his great *Ecclesiastical History*, St. Bede tells of England's conversion to Christianity. The Druid King,

Edwin, was troubled by the preaching of itinerant Celtic monks who had come from across the sea. King Edwin called a meeting of his councilors to see what they made of it.

Picture it. The king and his barons in a great hall - - made of stout stones --hung with tapestries---illuminated by candles. Picture the table around which they gathered.

They were confused and disturbed...until one councilor stood and spoke not of the Christian preaching but of human life. "Human life," he said, "is like a sparrow's flight, a sparrow coming in by accident into a great lighted hall in winter. It flies frantically through the tranquil bright air - "gorgeous" - and then out again, back into the cold and dark.

Human life is that quick interval of light, warmth and fellowship. Human life is the sparrow's flight. What goes before and comes after, we cannot know. Therefore," the king's councilor said, "if these new preachers have some certainty on these matters, it behooves us to receive it."

Some certainty? Jim Morton had it.

Jesus said, "Not one bird falls from the sky without the Father's knowing it and caring."

Jesus said, "Do not be afraid. You are worth many sparrows."

That is what Jim Morton kept telling us: WE are more precious than all the birds to whom he likened us.

Jim was our sparrow - gone through our great hall all too quickly. ALL TOO QUICKLY!

"Hey Bird Man, what do you know?"

Wouldn't Jim point - how he loved to point in this place; wouldn't Jim point us to the iconic carvings in stone here, there, and everywhere - the renderings in glass all around us - of the tradition's most beloved image of God. Which is, of course, a bird.

The Holy Spirit who hovers - with, in Hopkins' phrase, "ah bright wings" - not only over the illuminated hall, but over the cold and dark outside; over death.

The Holy Spirit who once hovered over the formless deep from which to draw this magnificent creation, which, as Genesis reports, God then promptly pronounced as "Good. Very Good."

"Hey, Bird Man, what do you know?"

And can't we hear him answering? "Gorgeous.

Wonderful. Yes."