



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York**

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**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, June 16, 2002**  
*The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist  
at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector  
on  
Exodus 19:2-8a  
Romans 5:6-11  
Saint Matthew 9:35—10:15  
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*THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL*

*While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Most of the great theologians have written commentaries on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and there is good reason for this. Romans is Paul's most comprehensive exposition of the great truths of salvation through Jesus Christ, a summary of the Apostle's whole career of preaching. Accordingly, he sent it to the Church in Rome, the center of the empire, where the apostle's teaching would be preserved and circulated for the whole Christian world.

But you don't have to be a theologian to cherish what Paul wrote in today's portion from Romans. It is a core piece of Good News, and he states it three times, with rising intensity: 1) while we were still weak, Christ died for the ungodly. 2) God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Finally, 3) for if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

What the Apostle says is not flattering to us, but it is wonderful news indeed. He refers to "us" as "weak," "ungodly," "sinners," and "enemies," that is, enemies of God! All of us are included in these unflattering descriptions. Whether in human terms we happen to be successful or failures, respectable or disreputable, does not matter. In moral and spiritual terms, without Christ, no matter who we are, we are in fact weak and therefore ungodly, sinners and therefore enemies of grace.

This is in fact something we need to take in. Many years ago when I was a young priest working as an assistant for a splendid rector<sup>1</sup> who was a powerful preacher of the Gospel, a veteran churchman (actually a vestryman) confronted the rector at the church door after the main service. He was upset. "What is all this you guys keep preaching about salvation?" he cried. *"I've lived a pretty good life. I don't need to be saved!"*

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<sup>1</sup> Fr. John R. Purnell, Rector of All Saints Church, Ashmont, Boston, 1975-1981.

Christianity is not about living a pretty good life. It is not about comparable virtue, strength, intelligence, or status. It is not about moral improvement, social respectability, or religious aesthetics. It is about the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is entirely God's gift, something we have done nothing to earn or to deserve. The scandal of it is, the rich are in just as much need of it as the poor; the sophisticated are just as far from it as the simple; the good, the beautiful and the strong have achieved it no more than the bad, the unattractive, and the powerless. Our upset churchman at the door may have lived a pretty good life, but at that moment he was much farther from the kingdom of God than, say, the penitent thief on the cross next to Jesus.

I am not putting down moral improvement, social respectability or religious aesthetics. These may be, and often are, side effects in the lives of those who receive and live by the Gospel of Christ. But before we ever consider such things, we need to understand that the two thieves on the cross next to Christ dramatize every person's position with respect to eternal life. Either, like the one, we can go on railing and cursing and justifying ourselves; or, like the other, we can believe, let go of our pride, and be with Christ *today* in Paradise.<sup>2</sup>

What Paul is saying, and what we can embrace and cherish in the depth of our souls for all time and eternity, is that God has shown superabundant love for us by sending Christ his Son to die for our justification. Justification means that God has substituted Christ's righteousness for our unrighteousness; that God has received Christ's death as the propitiation, the payment of the moral shortfall, for our frailty and sin.

The Apostle is saying even more than this. In the words of an early Christian commentator on today's passage, "Christ's death brought death to the enmity which existed between us and God and ushered in reconciliation."<sup>3</sup> When we receive this good news, when we are baptized into it and take it into our hearts by faith, we are reconciled to God through the Body of Christ. From then on, we live by the power of the risen Christ; we walk by the Spirit; we know we are "in Christ" and that we are on pilgrimage into the kingdom of heaven. This Eucharist is a refuge on the way, where we are fed by the risen Lord in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.

Our Old Testament lesson and Gospel today form bookends around Saint Paul's great Gospel proclamation in Romans. In Exodus, we see God gathering and leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land. "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," the Lord said to Moses. In the Gospel, we see Jesus sending out the apostles for their first mission; it was the beginning of a scattering of disciples into the whole world from the Holy Land, bringing the Good News of Israel's Messiah to the corners of the earth. That was why Paul wrote and sent his greatest letter to the Church at Rome, to help fulfill that mission.

Dearly Beloved, there is a paradox at the very heart of our faith, and the more surely we grasp it, the happier we shall be. The death of Jesus, from the human point of view, is a tragedy, a disaster, a defeat for goodness. But in fact the day Christ died is Good Friday; his death is his finest hour, the seal of his victory and glorification. The Resurrection is God's vindication of that victory.

This paradox, in Saint Paul's words, is the "foolishness of God which is wiser than men" and the "weakness of God which is stronger than men." (I Cor 1:25). As we come more and more to appreciate this Gospel, we experience the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in such ways as these: We see that the more we seek God's grace the more we have it. We

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<sup>2</sup> See St. Luke 23:39-43. KJV uses "malefactors" for "thieves"; RSV uses "criminals."

<sup>3</sup> Origen, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, VI, Romans*, edited by Gerald Bray, p. 133.

discover that the more surrendered we are to God's will the more freedom we have. We are delighted to find that the more yielded we are to God's Spirit the more strength and confidence we have. Far be it from me to boast, says the Apostle, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, our life and resurrection, by whom we are saved and have obtained our freedom!

This wonderful paradox is what our ministry here at Saint Thomas Church is all about. I pray the knowledge of this grace will grow and deepen here among us, and spread abroad to as many people as possible, who so desperately need to know it.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all, now and forever. Amen.