



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 13, 2005
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Choral Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Mark 8:31—9:1

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AFTER THE DISCLOSURE

I have something to say to you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

There comes a moment in every relationship when something must be said. “Before we go any further,” you might say, “you need to know this about me.” It is a moment of self-disclosure, a vulnerable moment. “You seem to like me,” one is saying; “but there’s something you don’t know that I have to tell you.”

The disciples were getting to like Jesus very much. They had been with him for more than a few months. He had called them with his voice of strange authority; they had followed that voice and seen miracle, healing, exorcism, and a bold and fresh interpretation of the inheritance which was theirs in religion. They had followed the voice and seen crowds pulled in by his authority. When the moment was right, the Holy Spirit had given them to understand that he was the Messiah, the one anointed by God to bring salvation to many. In fact, they had just told him so.

Jesus, it seems, was touched by their expression of this intimate knowledge about who he was. And so he said, as it were, *There’s something I have to tell you.* This all seems to be going pretty good right now. But I am going to be . . . handed over to death. I will be betrayed. Lies will be spoken about me. There are many things I will suffer, and then I will die. I know this is hard for you to accept, but it has to be. And you need to know this, if you want to keep on with me.

When I was a priest up in Dutchess County, about a decade ago, one fall Sunday morning, I walked a big man with a shaved head, his petite wife, and a heart-winning little girl of about age 4. Let’s call the man Rafael. It was a small church, so everyone noticed them, and welcomed them into the life of the parish. They were bright and interested people, and I just assumed that Rafael was a cool guy who shaved his head. Until a few months later, when I learned that when he first walked through our church doors he had just finished chemotherapy. The chemotherapy, as it turned out however, had failed in its purpose. He had testicular cancer, and sometime between Easter and Pentecost he died.

In those months when we talked from time to time I learned from him and his wife that this was not his first time with this cancer. Its initial appearance had come some years before, right in the midst of their preparations for marriage. Can you imagine that conversation? Darling, I know how much you love me. I have just seen the doctor, and he tells me I have . . . cancer,

testicular cancer. If you don't want to go on with the marriage, I understand. . . . She, as you will have surmised, stuck with him, and he had his treatments, and they had their marriage, and the cancer went away, and they conceived their child, and several years passed, and the cancer returned.

Think of that moment. *There's something I have to tell you.* We all know Peter's famous reaction to Jesus' self-exposure. It was basically, *Are you crazy? Jesus*, everything's going your way, look at all the good you have done, look at all the good you could keep on doing! Do you think there aren't still thousands of sick people in this world who need you? There are! We can organize, we can keep off the opposition, you don't have to give in. Have courage, man! This movement you've started, it can go far. Why should you throw it all away and let them kill you?

It was Peter's voice, but Jesus had heard it before. *Get behind me, Satan!*

It was necessary that it happen this way, although the necessity was not, to be frank, in the original plans. *We* made it necessary. But what he does for us, by dying in this brilliant way, is he opens the way for us to find life. If you want to live, you have to give your life away.

A great man¹ has called this, "The law of the gift." It's the way the world is put together, although, strangely, the world is ignorant of this law of its structure. Whatever you keep turns to mold and dust in your hands. Whatever you give away comes back to you but transformed into something better. In the Eucharist, we give God some bread and wine and a little bit of our money, all as little signs of our feeble attempts to give him our selves, our souls and bodies. And God gives them back to us, as Jesus. It's the law of the gift.

Peter's advice, you see, was truly Satanic. Had Jesus tried to hang on to his glory and power, it would have been a terrible betrayal. He had to give himself up to the evil our race had let loose in the world. Rafael's wife could have left him when his cancer first appeared. They were not yet bound to each other as husband and wife. Still she stayed, and there was a gift of a child, and later the tears of death. You can go away now, if you want. He has told you what will happen. Or you can stay, despite this knowledge he has given you, and walk the Holy Week with the church. *I have something to say to you. Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*

¹John Paul II.