



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

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, August 26, 2007
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Luke 13:22-30
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THREE POINTS ABOUT HEAVEN

“Strive to enter by the narrow door...”

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

The setting for today’s Gospel reading is from Saint Luke’s narrative of Jesus on his way to face his destiny in Jerusalem. Jesus’ disciples are dismayed by his predictions of his death at the hands of the authorities, and they are amazed by their Master’s determination nevertheless to go and face them. But for Jesus it is a matter of his integrity; namely, his faithfulness to his life’s mission to do the will of God whom he called Father.

This context provides urgency to every question brought before Jesus. Time is fleeting; the perspective is radical. Today, someone asks Jesus, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” I want to focus on what I think are three main points of Jesus’ answer: First, that we should “strive to enter by the narrow door.” Second, that there comes a time when the Lord “rises up and shuts the door.” Third, that mere familiarity with the Lord will not suffice for entry; on the contrary, he will say to those who have nothing more to claim than familiarity, “I do not know where you come from; depart from me...” Let us take these three points in order.

First, the Lord ignores the question of curiosity about the fewness (How many?) of those who will be saved. He turns on the questioner and makes it a personal issue. The questioner and all the rest of us are challenged to strive to enter by the narrow door (or, in the King James Version, the “strait gate”). In other words, *desire* for salvation, for eternal life, for the kingdom of heaven, is what matters. God is Almighty Spirit: Our desire for God is how God knows us. Desire is a matter of the will. The will is sovereign over our thoughts, words and deeds, and orders them to the desired end. Strive, says Jesus, strive. Ask and you shall receive; seek and you shall find; knock and the door shall be opened.

Second, the Lord says the time comes when the door will be shut. Life is not a dress rehearsal; we do not come back in order to have a second “take.” Holy Scripture nowhere teaches reincarnation. Our life, as given, is precious and unrepeatable; so precious that the value of every man, woman, and child is nothing less than the price of the sacrifice of the Son of God – the very mission Jesus was pressing on to fulfill. Time, said a wise spiritual writer, is God’s second best gift

after grace.¹ So our life is precious not only because God in Christ has placed the value of his own Precious Blood upon us, but also because there comes an end. There is only so much time to live. In the words of the Psalmist, “[Lord] teach us to number our days, that we apply our hearts unto wisdom.” So if we desire to enter by that narrow door, we must, in the Lord’s word, strive, and there is no time to waste. Indeed, “time is short; eternity is long.”²

Finally, it is not enough to claim credentials of some sort if we do not in fact care enough, if we do not ourselves have the active will to strive to enter the door of the kingdom. As Jesus says, the plea, “We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets,” doesn’t suffice. We often get requests for, say, a wedding or funeral in the church because, although the principal party hardly darkened the door of the church, they claimed a connection to someone who in fact did or does have an active church commitment and membership. We do try to give such claims the benefit of the doubt. We also hope some latent but as of yet inactive desire for God may be kindled and brought to life in someone through the church’s ministry in such services and rituals. But no one passes through the door of the kingdom by proxy. God has no grandchildren, only immediate children. In other words, if you and I come to God and seek him, we shall find him. That is how we know God and are known by Him. Through Jesus Christ God directly becomes our Father by adoption and grace, through the means of desire and faith.

Jesus, in those minutes in today’s Gospel while on his way to Jerusalem and his cross, said vital words for us in response to the question, “Lord, who those who are saved be few?” He was brief and urgent because he himself was pressed as he approached his crucifixion. But let us not deceive ourselves into thinking we can escape the urgency. *The great question of life is, in fact: What do you want?* If the Gospel of Christ is the truth, then every one of us has a pointed issue at stake in our lives with three dimensions: 1) If we want to be with God, then we must strive for it; 2) This day may be the only day we have to strive for it by thinking, speaking and acting as though we were Christians; and 3) Nothing short of our own personal say-so will do.

I conclude with a classic devotion. “Remember, Christian Soul, that thou hast this day, and every day of thy life, God to glorify, Jesus to imitate, a soul to save, a body to mortify, sins to repent of, virtues to acquire, Hell to avoid, Heaven to gain, Eternity to prepare for, time to profit by, neighbors to edify, the world to despise, devils to combat, passions to subdue, death perhaps to suffer, judgment to undergo.”³ These words are stern, yes; but they are faithful to Jesus in today’s Gospel. They blow away our pretences and distractions and call us to attend to reality.

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

¹ This was paraphrased to me by a fellow priest citing John Henry Newman. I cannot find the reference, but it sounds like Newman, who did indeed write, “Time is short; eternity is long,” as he was finishing his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.

² See footnote above.

³ As in *Saint Augustine’s Prayer Book: A Book of Devotion for Members of The Episcopal Church*, edited by Loren Gavitt. Holy Cross Publications, 1966, page 2.