



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
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Sunday, February 14, 2010

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Festal Evensong

at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Joel C. Daniels
on
Deuteronomy 6:1-9

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LOVE IN THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

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

We don't hear a reading from the Gospel this Evensong, but this is one Sunday afternoon that you can say we may as well have. "Hear O Israel... You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." In the Gospel, it's Jesus' response to the question, "What is the greatest commandment of the law?" And he names this, from Deuteronomy, adding "with all your mind" to the list as well. So when we hear it this afternoon from Deuteronomy, we hear it "in the original," you might say.

I'm personally feeling a little "in the original" at Saint Thomas these days as well, as the Rector has graciously invited me to join the parish on Sunday mornings – re-join the parish, I should say, as a former parishioner who was encouraged and supported through the ordination process by the clergy and people of Saint Thomas Church several years ago. I have begun a new stage in my vocation and ministry, beginning a doctoral program in theology, and I am profoundly grateful that I can be here on Sundays again. The Rector may, at some point in the future, consider this invitation a serious lapse in his judgment; but I appreciate it very much.

But whether the Great Commandment is "in the original," or in the Gospel, we may still have a question: how is it, exactly, that we're supposed to do this? How do we love the Lord our God with all our heart, our soul, our strength?

Because let's not kid ourselves; it's hard. Hard to do; even hard to know what it's supposed to look like. Love is a tricky thing; coming, sometimes, like a hurricane, and leaving, sometimes, in a storm of tears and recriminations; a turbulence as true, for some, in their love of God, as it is of a romantic love. If you've ever struggled with your faith, then you know that love is a tricky thing, and it can be hard to know how to do it well.

Thankfully, the benefit of a history that spans millennia is that we're not in it alone, we're not forging a path where none existed before. The Church is fortunate to have exemplars, common Christians who have done uncommon things. We have a yearly cycle of remembrance of these saints, men and women as diverse and varied as first-century martyrs, missionaries to Europe, to the New World, to the Far East. Civil rights heroes celebrated next to medieval theologians, and even the disciples themselves. When we ask, Love, how do we do it? These are clues to our answer, guideposts along that path.

And I find it very fitting that this Thursday, right after Ash Wednesday brings us into the Lenten season, that we remember Martin Luther, founder of the German Reformation. Martin Luther, who preached, first and foremost, grace. Then, grace. And finally, grace. First and last and always, grace. Arguably as much as any Christian since Saint Paul himself, this Thursday we remember a man who knew, and preached, that the floodgates of God's love have been opened. Sharing this message was the way he acted out how we love God with heart, with soul, with strength.

But we see obedience to this commandment most clearly, most transparently, in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, whose words of worship "we are bold to say" every week, those words, "thy will be done." His is a piety, a worship, a love, beyond any other. But it's also a warning. Loving this much may not lead to chocolate and roses, but hard wood, iron nails, and a shouting crowd. This love may not taste very sweet.

But it would be a mistake – a profound mistake – to think that this Great Commandment is an initiative that we undertake independently, a tariff placed on the relationship between God and us, or the cost of admission to the heavenly banquet. Exactly the opposite is the case.

It's true that Israel was commanded to love the Lord, but this was the second step in that divine relationship, not the first step; Israel was to love Yahweh, but that commandment was inseparable from the fact – indeed, utterly dependent on the fact – that the Lord Himself had already chosen to love Israel. Well before any commandments. Well before any Israel. Before Abraham, before history, God had already so loved the world. In the time before time, in ages primordial, at the beginning of the universe: God already so loved the world.

Indeed, it is a love that was built into the fabric of the cosmos, flowing from the bottomless well of love that is the very life of God. Love is the life of God because, where love is something we do, love is who God is.

These are drastically different things, infinitely different things. The love that we do with our heart, soul, strength, is a pale shadow of that bottomless well of love that is the very being of God. Love the Lord with heart, with soul, with strength – with your whole person – but know that our love is a free response, a celebration, a rejoicing, in the one who loved us first. The God we worship is the God who loved us first.

In other words, this Great Commandment that we hear is actually a description of the way God loves us; a commandment that is addressed to us, but that more accurately describes the one who gave it. It is we, in fact, who are loved with heart, with soul, with strength. When we hear in Deuteronomy a description of an all-encompassing dedication: "Let these words be written on your heart; when you walk, when you lie down, when you rise; on your hands, your head, your house, your gates. Proclaim your faithfulness for generations to come," this is not just a commandment; these words are a mirror. But not a mirror that shows us our reflection; this is a mirror set on an angle, pointing upwards, reflecting the image of the One who spoke them. We may not recognize ourselves, in these words, but, if we look closely, we may catch a reflected glimpse of the loving-kindness of the God who is love. If we look closely, we may see that we are chosen people.

Saint Paul tells us that one Easter day we will arrive, at long last, to Jerusalem; joining the saints who have walked before us; and there we will behold face to face, what we had only seen, dimly, reflected in that mirror. When the veil is removed, we will find there the outstretched arms of God, who has promised us, first: grace. Then, grace. And finally, grace.

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