



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, May 5, 2013
The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Acts 16:9-16 and Revelation 21:10,22—22:5
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THE HOPE OF A NEW JERUSALEM

In chapters 10 and 11 of the Acts of the Apostles we have the dramatic story of the gospel being taken to people who were not Jews. You may remember the story: Peter, perhaps during a postprandial siesta, has a dream in which he sees all sorts of critters lowered before him on a sheet, and he is told to rise, kill, and eat. He protests that he has never eaten anything unclean; the voice tells him not to call unclean anything that God has called clean. It happens three times. Peter awakes. There are some messengers who want him to go visit a non-Jew, the Gentile centurion Cornelius. Peter goes, and finds manifest evidence with Cornelius that God has prepared him to receive the Gospel. So Peter tells him about Jesus, then baptizes him. This was a monumental event in Christian history: to bring into the fellowship any human being at all who desires the baptism of Christ.

Still, this occurred only in Asia, what we would call the Middle East. In today's reading, Acts 16, the Gospel is taken out of Asia into Europe. This is also a story with some drama. Paul has his ideas of going to various places in present-day Asia Minor. But God keeps blocking him. Then he has a dream-vision of a man from Macedonia calling for him. So Paul sets sail for Greece, and comes soon to the leading city of Philippi, where he teaches and baptizes. A very important woman is named, Lydia, who becomes the center of a new Christian community there.

The drama of the book of Acts is the expansion of the Gospel: to all people, and to all places. This is the dynamism that drives the church throughout its history, even today. Saint Thomas Church is fixed in a place: but what a place! In this place it is our driving force to bring the gospel to a great variety of people, from our own children to immigrants and adults who come from other religious cultures and people who were nominally raised as Christians but somehow never really heard the gospel, even to people from far away places like Brooklyn, where we have, among others, many young artist friends. Today as in the first century, the gospel is for all people in all places.

But what is the Gospel? What is this thing we carry, the response to which is baptism and faith?

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Near the end of his vision, near the end of the Bible, seeing what will be at the end of all things, Saint John the Divine describes a new city. It has the name of an old city, Jerusalem, because the new creation is *ex vetera*, out of the old, not (like the first creation) *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. It comes down out of heaven to earth, out of the new heaven to the new earth. Note these details of Saint John's description of the city:

There is no temple in this city, no religious building, for the reason that God Almighty and the Lamb is its temple.

There is no need in the city for sun or moon—sun and moon may well exist, having been remade as part of the new creation that came out of the old, but their light is not needed, for the reason that God's glory is the light of the city and the Lamb is its lamp.

By the light of the city, all the nations walk. That is to say, all the peoples of the earth bring their glory to the city by means of the city's light. And that is to say, in the new earth, nothing is lost from the old earth which is clean when seen in the light of God. Everything that's good is brought to this city.

This city's gates are always open, never closed, because the city is open to everything that is human, and positive, and real. The city is in no way closed off from anything, and it is in no danger, and so its gates are always open. However, nothing unclean enters, and no person can enter who practices abomination or falsehood. Everything inhuman, everything negative, everything that's not true cannot stand the light of God and will not come into this city—everything, and everyone, of that sort simply will not come. But note, the city will do nothing to keep them out: for, to say it again, its gates are always open.

Water nourishes and does not threaten this city. There is a river that runs from God's throne through the city's midst and outward; the tree of life is on either side of the river, and that tree is always fruitful with a variety of fruit throughout the year; and that tree also has leaves which heal the nations who are coming to the city, walking in the city's light which is God's light: those nations are healed of anything that afflicts them and keeps them from being whole.

Where is this city? It is not, strictly speaking, in heaven. And that is why it is not quite right for us to say that when a believer dies she or he goes to heaven. Rather, when this city comes down from heaven the separation of heaven and earth is removed. The old heaven and the old earth will have passed away, and down from heaven comes Jerusalem, which becomes the center of the new earth. In the center of that city is the throne of God. At the end of all things God's very throne comes to earth. At that time, there is nothing accursed on earth; there is indeed the throne of God and of the Lamb; and there his servants worship him and see his face and bear the mark of his face on their own face—his mark on their foreheads—and to say it again, as John does, there is no night, no need of lamp or sun, and the servants of God reign for ever.

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Many of us, I think, fail to believe the whole Christian faith. We go along, trying to do a good job in the world while we have the time, but when someone dies, we don't take Christianity seriously enough. So we adopt for ourselves some vague spiritual notions that the spirit of the departed one still lives with us, or that she is in some happy place looking down on us (starting with making comments on her funeral), but it is all in truth rather thin soup, and not very exciting. By contrast, the serious gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel that Peter and Paul were compelled to offer to every human being in every place and which we are called to Fifth Avenue and Fifty-third to proclaim, is that God sent his Son into the world to make it possible for us to live without inhumanity and without falsehood but in truth and in friendship and to become glorious people. Jesus' resurrection is not a down-payment on a thinly spiritual inheritance of vague postmortem bliss but the decisive first step, the beginning of God's intention to transform this creation, which he made out of nothing, into a new creation, which he will make out of this one, an earth which can receive the holy city Jerusalem, a home where God's own throne will be placed, and to which everything that is authentically human will come. Reclothed in bodies that are animated by God's Spirit, the servants of God, the friends of Jesus, will be there, will see his face, and will reign as the great, unending symphony of creation will finally begin.