



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, June 9, 2019

*The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday
and Blessing of the Choir School Class of 2019*

*Procession and Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Acts 11:1-18, Revelation 21:1-6, and John 13:31-35
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"Look graciously upon us, O Holy Spirit, and give us, for our hallowing, thoughts that pass into prayer, prayers that pass into love, and love that passes into life with you for ever."
- Eric Milner-White (1884-1963)

The late charismatic Anglican, David Watson, once said *"The primary task of the Church is to worship God."* Worship is at the heart of our mission statement – to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ. Worship is the reason why we gather, and worship is the key to becoming the beloved community where all belong and all have a place. Earlier last month, in one of our weekly emailed newsletters, I quoted from Archbishop William Temple's book on Saint John's Gospel. His definition of worship is profound. He said this:

*"Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His Beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose - and all of this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable and therefore the chief remedy for that self-centeredness which is our original sin and the source of all actual sin."*¹

A few days ago, on June 6, we commemorated the 75th anniversary of D-day when allied forces landed on beaches in Normandy, France, beginning the greatest seaborne invasion in history and changing the course of the Second War. William Temple was Archbishop of Canterbury at that time. I find it poignant that his definition of worship is set against a backdrop of the horror of that war and the genocide of the Jewish People, about which he spoke passionately in the British Parliament; a war that exemplified self-centeredness and human aggrandizement.

In sharp contrast, Temple reminds us that the opposite of self-centeredness or self-aggrandizement is **Adoration of God** and it is the *Holy Spirit* that helps us to worship in this way – to become more attuned to God's presence.

Darin, Sammy, Elyot, Isaac; ² after each service, you and the rest of the choir have prayed the choristers' prayer of the Royal School of Church Music. But I wonder if you know the motto of the RSCM? From Paul's first letter to the Corinthians - ***Psallam spiritu et mente*** - *I will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also.* (1 Corinthians 14:15).

I will sing with the Spirit and with the understanding also. As the American musician Marty Haugen used to say, *"it's more than just the notes."*³

Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth. When we are open to the Spirit of truth, we begin to understand ourselves a little bit better and it affects our relationships with those around us. Did you notice in our reading from Acts today, when the Apostles were fully open to the Spirit of truth, they were understood by everyone!

My friends, today on this feast of Pentecost, we celebrate the Spirit of truth who will lead us into all truth and draw us from our self-centeredness and into a loving relationship with the Father, worshipping, loving, and serving our Lord Jesus Christ.

Darin, Sammy, Elyot, Isaac; you have been part of a choir that is at the heart of our attempts to worship God in this place. But the choir is not an end in itself – it is a means to an end. It is a servant of the liturgy; a word which means ‘the work of the people.’ Thus, the choir you have belonged to is part of a great continuum stretching back over time but with the same purpose - to help all of us worship better – through holiness, truth, beauty, love, and surrender - and to the best of our ability as we gather up everything we do in selfless adoration and praise.

The Eleventh Rector, Father John Andrew, said this, *“The choir isn’t there to silence a congregation into passive acquiescence. Or to impress. Choirs are there to help us by leading the way so that we can follow gladly – with energy and delight...We find ourselves wanting to do more, making something beautiful for God.”*⁴

We find ourselves wanting to do more, making something beautiful for God.

Darin, Sammy, Elyot, Isaac, over the past few years, you have not just participated in music-making through singing, you have learned *how* to sing and how complicated it can be to make music. You have experienced how something sung in rehearsal can feel so different when sung a few minutes later in worship. You have learned how composers have been inspired by God’s Holy Spirit to create such fabulous music; by participating in that music-making, you have participated in the creativity of God.

But, more importantly, your music-making has been done while you have also lived in community, in our Choir School, which like music itself can also be complex and not always easy to master. The Headmaster, the faculty and the staff have shared in that community life and they have helped you discover that to build community, you have to constantly work at it – in a similar fashion to Archbishop Temple’s definition of worship, by putting others ahead of your own needs and aspirations for the greater good of the whole. Your schooling has made you into fine young men: rounded, inquisitive, intelligent but, I hope, humble. Humble enough to know that you still have much to learn and that you will always be learning and changing and growing.

75 years ago, this week, brave soldiers had to make a choice. They knew that by responding to the call for freedom and justice, they could change the course of history. They also knew that it would likely change their own, and some knew that that also meant the possibility of death. Darin, Sammy, Elyot, Isaac, going hand in hand with bravery is **humility** – knowing one’s place in the great scheme of things and knowing that self-centeredness will never allow for the possibility of change and growth.

There is a beautiful hymn written about the Holy Spirit with an equally beautiful tune: ‘Come down, O love divine,’ to the tune *Down Ampney*, composed by Vaughan Williams and named after the village of his birth. But, I have to say, I am perplexed that the compilers of our own hymn book omitted (what I think) is one of the most profound verses in it. It speaks of that other antidote to self-centeredness – *humility* – and how when one is truly open to the promptings of the Spirit of truth then, examination of conscience allows for change and for growth:

‘Let holy charity, mine outward vesture be,

*and lowliness become mine inner clothing;
true lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part
and o'er its own short comings weeps with loathing."*

Darin, Sammy, Elyot, Isaac: We wish you well as you leave us. In the future, change will come. May you never fear it, but embrace it and discover the breath of God calling you into a new way of living, even when life is hard and difficult to accept. May you also discover that true humility can lead to a greater depth of love and understanding and bring you closer to God and, therefore, to those around you.

May God bless you. May God bless our Choir School in its centennial year. May God bless this parish and pour his Holy Spirit on us mightily, and let us all not only try to sing with the Spirit, but with the understanding also.

¹ 'Readings in Saint John's Gospel' page 67. William Temple (15 October 1881 – 26 October 1944) was Bishop of Manchester, then Archbishop of York, then Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942-1944

² The names of the graduating choristers.

³ From a lecture by Marty Haugen 'Keeping the People's Song Alive' delivered to a conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1998.

⁴ 'Nothing Cheap and Much that is Cheerful' p. 179