



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

Sunday, September 22, 2019
The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Amos 8:4-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-7, and Luke 16:1-13
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“My life is hid in him that is my treasure.”

There is a great sense of irony that today’s readings challenge us to think about greed and dishonest wealth on a day when the Rector of a Church is charged to preach about raising money! So, let’s immediately face up to this hard saying of Jesus, ‘you cannot serve God and wealth.’ In other words, Jesus is inviting his followers to examine their lives and their dealings with one another. He invites you and me to examine what is important in our lives and where our priorities are in relation to the things that we hold dear and, today, wealth. His parable also invites us to examine how faithful we are to God’s plan and how respectfully we are dealing with one another and with the things entrusted to us. The prophecy of Amos is even more direct – he describes a community where lip-service is paid to God; where greedy people put their own ends first and, in order to make a fast buck, are tempted to defraud and cheat. They say, “*When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances?*” But Amos was not interested in False Trade Description Law or Weights and Measures, rather the fact that religious observance was also false.

Today, in this Church, we are called to reflect on what matters in our lives and why we come to this beautiful place week by week and day by day.

Jesus was once asked by a lawyer which of the commandments was the greatest and answered without hesitation, “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.*” (see Matthew 22:35-40)

This is at the heart of the prophecy of Amos.

This is at the heart of the ministry of Jesus Christ: **God first.**

That is why we are here in this Church;

God first.

That is why we try to be a community;

God first.

It is even why we are concerned about the homeless, the hungry, and social justice because Jesus says the second commandment is *like the greatest commandment*:

God first.

And it is the reason why we appeal each year to our congregation and supporters to pledge to this Church:

God first.

Our Annual Appeal is not about supporting organized religion, the Anglican Way, the Episcopal Church, the whims of the Rector and the Vestry ‘that I kind of like this year’, or even the Choir School with its 100-year-old tradition; the Annual Appeal is the voice of Jesus saying, **‘Do *you* put God first?’** If I want to love the Lord my God with all my heart and with all my soul and with all my mind, I must engage all three of them – heart, soul, and mind – and examine my life accordingly.

Our own mission statement is rooted firmly in this challenge of Jesus; to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ through the Anglican tradition and our unique choral heritage. That is, to put God firmly first, above my own, sometimes, petty concerns and priorities and to realize that Jesus should be at the center of my life and directing the way I should go and, yes, that includes what I do with my time, my talent, *and* (wait for it), my treasure. Time, talent, treasure! Putting God first.

A young boy came to Sunday School rather late and looking a little glum. His teacher knew that he was usually very prompt and asked him if anything was wrong. The boy replied no, that he was going to go fishing but his dad had told him that he needed to go to church. The teacher was extremely impressed and asked the boy if his dad had explained to him *why* it was more important to go to church than to go fishing. To which the boy replied, *“Yes he did. Dad said he didn’t have enough bait for both of us!”*

Have you ever asked yourself why worship is so important? Why we gather in this glorious sanctuary and with this glorious liturgy and music?

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the second World War, expressed his understanding of worship in the most eloquent and inspirational way, 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

Jesus said, *“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy **heart**, and with all thy **soul**, and with all thy **mind**.”*

Worship engages the totality of our being; the connecting of the heart with the mind and the soul with the body; it engages with all of our senses – *all* of them. And worship, by being active and never passive (for it is the response of the created to the creator and not the other way around), moves us from self to other – from worldliness to Godliness – from sinfulness to pure love.

The great German systematic theologian, Karl Barth, in his seminal work ‘Church Dogmatics’ sums up Temple’s wonderful description of worship in one, simple sentence: *“Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life.”* Just ponder that amazing sentence again:

Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life.

If that is the case, how valuable is worship to you and to me? How much value do you give to the vision of our forebears who built this sanctuary to the glory of God and a Choir School to nurture the young and to

fill this space with heavenly music? And, more importantly, what time do I make for that kind of worship in my daily life? And am I allowing that kind of worship to truly transform my life and order my priorities?

When I was a parish priest in the East End of London, I had a lovely old parishioner called Ada. She had a remarkable skill and, as a young woman, had the chance of a lifetime to attend the Royal School of Needlework. Just before she was due to go, there was a terrible accident and her younger sister was left completely blind. Without hesitation she gave up her place at the College and spent the rest of her life as her career. There was one thing that she did not give up - her prayer and her worship, and her commitment to her church. She prayed far better than I ever could. She put God first; tithing what she could (that is, giving proportionally of her wealth) she was generous with her time, her talents, and her treasure, even when she became frail herself. She lived out Karl Barth's amazing definition of worship. As Churchwarden, she would sometimes look at me with a wry smile after mass as people were leaving Church. "*Why is it, Father,*" she would say, "*that people go to church looking like they are going to the dentist? And they go home from Church...looking like they've been to the Dentist!*"

My dear friends, we are starting this year's annual appeal thinking about worship and what we count as treasure. We hear the challenge of Jesus to sort out our priorities and to put God first.

Let me end with one of George Herbert's poems entitled Colossians III:3. The poem reflects on that scripture but makes it extraordinarily personal; within the poem, a line runs diagonally through the text; hidden when the poem is listened to, but revealed when the poem is studied on the page:

*My words and thoughts do both express this notion,
That *Life* hath with the sun a double motion.
The first *Is* straight, and our diurnal friend :
The other *Hid*, and doth obliquely bend.
One life is wrapt *In* flesh, and tends to earth ;
The other winds t'wards *Him* whose happy birth
Taught me to live here so *That* still one eye
Should aim and shoot at that which *Is* on high—
Quitting with daily labour all *My* pleasure,
To gain at harvest an eternal *Treasure*.*

That diagonal line is the reason I am confident that you will respond to our Annual Appeal this year, *for it reads: **My life is hid in him that is my treasure.***

¹. from 'Readings in Saint John's Gospel' page 67