



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 Evensong
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Esther 3:1–4:3 and Luke 3:7-18
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Putting God First

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.

In our second lesson, John the Baptist received all kind of people who asked him this very same question; how to order their lives and to get their priorities straight.

Jesus was once asked by a lawyer which of the commandments was the greatest. Jesus 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)

Putting God first.

It is at the heart of the ministry of Jesus Christ; it is why we are here at this moment, why we are attempting to make community together. It is even why we are concerned about the homeless, the hungry, and social justice because Jesus says the second commandment is *like the first and greatest commandment*. Therefore, it is the reason why we appeal each year to our congregation and supporters to pledge to this Church:
Putting 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 Christ; 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* my treasure.

A man brought a brand-new Ferrari car. He was so proud of this car; he had worked so hard to afford it so he cherished it and gently polished it with the softest of cloths. On Monday morning, he got up early and parked it in on the main road in front of his office to show it off to his colleagues. As he was getting out of the car, a truck came along, too close to the car, and took off the door before speeding off down the road.

Astonished and furious, the man took out his mobile phone and called the police. The police officer arrived almost immediately and, taking one look at the scene, called for an ambulance. The man started screaming, *“My car! My Ferrari. It is ruined. No matter how hard they try to repair it, it will never be the same again!”* The police officer responded, *“Hey man, I*

don't think you have got your priorities right!" The man turned and shouted at the police officer, "How can you say such a thing at a time like this?" The officer replied, "Erm. Don't you realize that your right arm was torn off when the truck hit you?" The man looked down in horror and said, "Oh my God! My Rolex watch!"

Today, my friends, we get our priorities right. We gather to worship and to put God first.

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the second World War, said these eloquent and inspiring words about worship:

*"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

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? How much value do you place on coming here Sunday by Sunday, and day by day? And am I allowing worship to truly transform my life and order my priorities?

Let me share with you 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