



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

Sunday, November 17, 2019
The Twenty-Third 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
Malachi 4:1-2a, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, and Luke 21:5-19
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Annual Appeal 2019 – Strategic Planning

Last Sunday was Remembrance Sunday and, at 4pm Choral Evensong, we commemorated the 75th anniversary of D-day during the Second World War. In my sermon, I talked about the importance of remembering our war dead and the sacrifice that they made for their country and for the cause of peace and justice. I find it poignant that Remembrance Sunday comes in the middle of our Annual Appeal. I have said before that this church and its unique choral tradition is blessed by the generosity of the dead; their memory lives on because of what they gave. But our war dead made the supreme sacrifice – they did more than tithe – they made a most sacrificial offering they could for their country. It is no coincidence that many war memorials in the UK use the words of Jesus from John's Gospel to adorn them:

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

This kind of offering – for society; for civilization; for democracy is easy to understand even though we may find the thought of war abhorrent. But at the heart of the Christian way of life is an even deeper offering, the example of which was given by Jesus as he hung upon the cross. His supreme sacrifice was to bring the whole world to himself – to reconcile everyone to God. Writing to the Ephesians, Paul says this:

"Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." (Ephesians 2:13-14)

It is a vision of a new humanity – a new creation; a new world made perfect in Jesus Christ the Son of God. It is the vision of the Church; to one day become the most perfect reflection of the life of the Trinity. For that reason, such a vision cannot be inward looking. The church is not a private club but a community of believers always looking out to the world in order to draw others into a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

Our Gospel reading today began with people marveling at the Temple in Jerusalem, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God. But the response of Jesus is challenging, almost harsh; he reminded his disciples that to having a deep relationship with him would come at a cost. Choices would have to be made. In a similar way, thousands of people are drawn to this sacred space week by week because of its beauty. It is truly an oasis of prayer in the heart of this great city. Many people who join our parish family come from different traditions and are captivated by the liturgy and the music and our adherence to our Anglican tradition; it draws them in. That tradition has a purpose - to deepen our spirituality and form us as Christians in the world. It is a living tradition that allows us to discover Christ in those around us and those who are different from us. It is a

tradition that encourages us to belong and to belong to a living community of faith, on the move, yet rooted in the story of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, tradition can be misunderstood as something fixed and rigid - a set of rules by which to measure things: Our understanding of truth; authenticity; even orthodoxy. At such times we are in danger of becoming like those who marveled at the beautiful stones that adorned the temple and who failed to recognize God's presence walking in their midst.

The evangelist Bishop Michael Marshall, an old friend of this church, used to say this about Tradition:

Tradition is the living faith of dead people.

Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people.

Tradition is a living thing, rooted in the past, but open to the promptings of the Spirit - open to change and discovery. Why? Because the tradition of the Church is Christian formation and Jesus is not a story from the past – he is alive:

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!¹

In the Gospels, Jesus was often at odds with the Scribes and the Pharisees - the keepers of tradition - because they had fossilized it and it was no longer creating a community where joy was experienced. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus describes a scribe of the Kingdom as someone who understands tradition in a radically different way. He says,

"Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." (Matthew 13:52)

Our mission statement is to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ through the Anglican Tradition and our unique choral heritage. In the middle of our mission statement is the word tradition but, my friends, it is not at its heart. At its heart are two words - Jesus Christ! Jesus is at the heart of our mission statement and our Anglican tradition is a means to an end - the particular charism by which we worship, love, and serve him. Through the beauty of worship and music; through a community that radiates love; through concern for the world around us and especially the poor and the marginalized, we seek that vision of the City of God here in this city of New York.

Our Vision is to become a vibrant community of faith that attracts others as much as this glorious building and its fabulous music naturally does.

Our vision, therefore, is simple - to become more Christ-like in everything that we do and making a difference to midtown Manhattan; making a difference to our own lives; becoming a beacon of hope in an increasingly dark and dangerous world. And to do that we need to ensure that our mission is strong, resolute, and ordered. The mission of this church requires each of us to play our part and that includes giving of our time, our talent, and our treasure. And that giving needs to be motivated not out of a sense of saving something precarious, and most certainly not out of a sense of guilt, but joyfully and with gratitude for what God has done for us and will still do for us.

Our strategic planning process with Wellspring Consulting is almost over and as we prepare to begin a new liturgical year, the Vestry will be releasing the first edition of its strategic plan. I say 'first edition' because the plan is really an ordering of our lives and that means it will be constantly changing and adapting to our needs. It will, therefore, be a familiar plan - rooted in our mission statement and around a vision to build a community of believers that is, like the name of our consultants, a wellspring - a wellspring of God's love and forgiveness; a community where all are drawn deeper into the mystery of Christ's love.

In our almost year-long period of self-study we discovered a number of principles that frame our identity:

Always in service to God - To serve Our Lord Jesus Christ as we live out our baptismal calling. It is our first principal and reminds us of the words of Jesus that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength.

Liturgical and musical excellence - To offer our very best to God in the way we carry out our liturgy and music

Adherence to tradition - To serve as custodians of the Anglican tradition and its unique choral heritage, and seek to grow, deepen and develop this centuries-old tradition.

Spirituality - To create an inspiring and reverent environment that brings people closer to God.

Education and formation - To value education and formation as an intrinsic part of that spiritual inquiry for young as well as for old.

Community and outreach - To welcome people into our congregation to share in our experience and expression of the glory to God, and reach beyond the walls of our church to foster a connection to the world at large.

The many action plans that will help us with our mission are firmly rooted in this identity. Some are big, many are simple, most are common sense, and all have come from the congregation, our friends and supporters, and from the staff of the church and its Choir School; a plan we can all own.

Everything that we will do will come out of that vision of being a community of believers, diverse and wonderfully different, and yet, travelling the same road to be rooted in God's presence. That is why we have been spending this ten-week period exploring through our sermons these aspects of our identity and how they are rooted in our mission. They are the backbone of our strategic plan which is, quite simply, measuring our mission against what is expected of us by Jesus and helping us make wise choices. We have been attempting to share that vision and encourage more people to support our mission through giving generously and sacrificially or, as I said in my first sermon of the series, by putting God first.

The great spiritual giant, Henri Nouwen, once gave a lecture on fund-raising. It is not a topic we generally associate with him but, as he spoke, it became apparent that his deep relationship with God and his passion for building community also affected his understanding of money and how we all have a part to play - rich and poor - in making that vision a reality.

He said this:

"From the perspective of the gospel, fund-raising is not a response to a crisis. Fund-raising is, first and foremost, a form of ministry. It is a way of announcing our vision and inviting other people into our mission. Vision and mission are so central to the life of God's people that without vision we perish and without mission we lose our way (Prov. 29:18; 2 Kings 21:1-9). Vision brings together needs and resources to meet those needs (Acts 9:1-19). Vision also shows us new directions and opportunities for our mission (Acts 16:9-10). Vision gives us courage to speak when we might want to remain silent (Acts 18:9)." ¹

My friends, I believe that our period of self-study has brought us closer together and you can feel the energy in this parish at the moment – it is an energy that comes from the Holy Spirit breathing new life into our community. It is an energy that is helping us with our mission and making it possible for us to share a common vision of the glory of God making all things new.

Come – Stay – Grow – Give – or, as we shall say on Advent Sunday in just a couple of weeks' time:

Come, Lord Jesus.

¹ When the Rector proclaimed the Easter Greeting, the whole congregation responded instinctively "He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" to which the Rector remarked that this was rather like a liturgical 7th innings stretch!

² Henri Nouwen - The Spirituality of Fundraising p. 3