



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

Sunday, December 1, 2019
The First Sunday of Advent

Advent Procession and Choral Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

+

God of the Rubbish Dump

Last Friday was a day of contrasts – retailers urged consumers to spend, spend, spend in the black Friday sales while young people around the world, inspired by sixteen-year-old Swedish environmentalist Greta Thunberg (who recently addressed the United Nations Climate Action Summit on 23 September) held black Friday strikes to call attention to the dangers of climate change. Meanwhile, on Westminster Bridge in London there was yet another fatal terrorist attack; such a wasteful loss of life and for no good reason.

In 1992, the principal of Public School 15 in the Red Hook waterfront district of Brooklyn was shot to death as he looked for a missing fourth-grade boy from his school where he had served faithfully for the previous 26 years. He had served that school since graduating as a teacher. In a poignant way, he lived out the parable that Jesus told of the lost sheep and put himself in harm's way looking for the one who had gone missing. He died just before Christmas and in his Advent 4 sermon that year, my predecessor Father John Andrew spoke movingly about the loss of that teacher's life and contrasted it with the throw-away mentality of human beings and their inability to care for the world entrusted to them, including one another. He described Patrick Daly as a caring shepherd whose life had been wasted – thrown away - by drug barons. He said this: *"No new phenomenon, this. Sadly, people have always done this to each other, ignorant of God's will and wish that his creation sing in harmony, ignorant that life-waste is a moral problem."*¹

The themes of Advent should make us stop and take stock. What matters to you? What do you take for granted? And what would have to be taken away from you to realize the responsibility each of us has for this world, the communities where we live, and the people with whom we walk the streets of this great city? Father Andrew went on to reflect on the mystery of the incarnation. He said this: *"The astonishing thing is this: God has intervened by making himself a disposable item. God places himself right among the life-waste."*

My friends, our God cares so much for you and for me, for this world in which we live, and for the future of humanity, that he sent his only Son into that world to redeem that world. Writing to the Church in Philippi, Paul says, *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."* (Philippians 2:5-8)

So, Advent is about making choices, about caring for the world and for one another. Some will say that Greta Thunberg should go back to school and keep her mouth shut. But God is never silent and cries out himself against waste and violence and sin – he did so from the cross – and Jesus still pleads for us at the right hand of the Father, presenting his wounds at the heart of the Godhead. It is this eternal freshness of

the wounds of love that should urge us to take seriously the state of our relationships, one with another and with the created order.

John Andrew puts it so much more beautifully: *“Christmas time reminds us that God has views on garbage disposal; that he is the heart and soul conservation of life in the world. He ensures that by intervening personally: by placing himself in his son among it all, to live among it, and finally to save it – by being disposed of. He has plans for us. And waste is not part of them.”*

This new world order is at the heart of the prophecy of Isaiah, who describes a world of harmony and co-existence; a world where the opposite of power and waste rules: *“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”* (Isaiah 11:6)

Next time you can’t decide if it is worth sorting your garbage to recycle it, use it as a little spiritual exercise to help you reflect on what God counts as garbage and what kind of world God wants for us and for our children to inherit.

Let me end with a poem of Archbishop Rowan Williams called “Advent Calendar”:

He will come like last leaf's fall.
One night when the November wind
has flayed the trees to the bone, and earth
wakes choking on the mould,
the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.
One morning when the shrinking earth
opens on mist, to find itself
arrested in the net
of alien, sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child. ²

1. “God and Garbage Disposal” from “My Heart is Ready” (pp 14 ff.)

2. Advent Calendar from *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (p. 15)