



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

Sunday, March 8, 2020
The Second Sunday in Lent

Choral Eucharist
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Alison J. Turner,
Associate for Children and Family Ministry

on
Lenten Sermon Series: The Seven Virtues – Diligence
+

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord” – Colossians 3:23

How diligent are you?

I sometimes like to watch cookery programs and find this vicarious experience to be very satisfying and what is more it requires no effort at all. I am always amazed by the way contestants work under pressure in a competitive environment. I am especially fascinated when each contestant is given the same ingredients, the same recipe, the same equipment and the same amount of time to create a Victoria Sponge, Ginger Fluff or other culinary delight, and yet the approach to the task in hand varies so greatly. Some contestants become immediately flustered and speed up under the stress of the lights, camera and action. Some proceed to misread the recipe, others burn pans as they lose focus or are distracted by their surroundings, while others follow the instructions to the letter and steadily and carefully use rules and measures, rather than approximation, in preparation for the task in hand....and surprise, surprise, it is always the careful, creative *as well as* ordered chefs who have the best results! Others simply end up slumped or tearful in the corner, disheveled and in a floury mess, with little to show for the time and efforts they have exerted. Here lies a cautionary tale. It is not the busy but steady, the diligent well-paced cooks who are focused on the right thing, and so win the day. Tortoises not hares who gain the prize.

I wonder what sort of cook you are? When you cook, do you prefer to prepare a Raymond Blanc intricate, and yet laborious extravaganza or the simplicity of something more functional, that can cook while you're out, such as a pot roast, or a TV meal prepared in 20 minutes, something quick and easy- as easy as a pot or cup of noodles? Or have you ever been tempted to present something as your own dish when it's actually takeout. Short cuts are tempting, aren't they? I am always amused by the line in the film *Calendar Girls* set in Yorkshire, where one of the Knapley Women's Institute cake winner, who has just entered a shop bought cake, is asked for her baking secrets, to which Chris, played by Helen Mirren replies, "I basically stick to my mother's advice about cake baking...first you sift the flour, line the bowl with butter, always use a warm spoon...and if it's a special occasion, go to Marks and Spencers."

Everyday diligence

We come across diligence as a positive and even necessary human quality in our everyday, as well as Lenten life. In the current repetitive reminders for diligence in cleanliness, in what Bishop Dietsch now calls a climate of fear.

We find diligence as a virtue in prose and poetry alike, as seen in the work of the nineteenth century poet, Emily Dickinson who speaks of *Angels soaring diligently* and how, *...when the work of a hero is done, he turned at the message, and rose with the harness of diligence on.*

And is seen in the work of the suffragettes, who among other pioneers are celebrated today on this international women's day.

Diligence is found in the language of classrooms, practice room, in the mantra of students, and even Brownie Guides, promise to do their best, to reach for the stars.

Diligence may also require a degree of a personal sacrificial quality, a necessary trait in any strive for excellence. Ask any artist or athlete. And practice makes perfect, doesn't it? I wonder what would it sound like if our musicians hadn't practiced together or learned the theory that underpins their talent and creativity in the way, they lead our worship or perform?

Essential diligence

And there are of course multiple jobs that require these very characteristics. And a wide range of professions that require a duty of care and due diligence, not as a desirable but essential quality of their work. Imagine a tax collector without an aptitude for numbers and an eye for accuracy? Or a fair-weather farmer that simply couldn't be bothered to get up in the morning? Here diligence is essentially a part of the rhythm of life and is the powerful beat of what they do.

And yet diligence can have its downfalls, if its value is solely equated with strength, perfectionism and self-absorption. The consequences of which can be counterproductive, to the point where some scholars speak of business and overworking, in the guise of diligence, to be a modern-day vice. Another of which is indifference.

Christian diligence

However, if we restrict our understanding of diligence to simply be a good quality that promotes hard work or even a Protestant work ethic, we limit its potential as a virtue of the kingdom and one that is woven into all our life, not just one small part based on our capacity or propensity for hard work. Kingdom values turn things upside down, so diligence can grow from *hard work* to *working hard and* can be witnessed in all we do, with all our heart and for the Lord, as proclaimed in the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians quoted earlier. I am sure you can all recall people who live for the Lord with all their heart for the Lord and one that pumps a powerful beat in all they do: like Jo who tirelessly visits their sick husband in hospital, Robyn the priest who visits the bereaved, however weary they feel, at the end of Holy week, in Frances' multiple lists of what to do in the event of their death. Each demonstrating what it is to put on Christ with the diligence and thoughtfulness as well as humility, and gentleness we have reflected on these past few weeks.

Here we see this week's virtue, diligence. as an integral expression of faithful calling, commitment and love that inhabits one's very being, while also reflects who they are, as gifted children of God, chosen, even before they came to be.

Such holy witnesses remind us that in all things "It's not what you do but the way that we do it..." and so results are found solely in our productivity or capacity for physical work but our attitude to it and the attitude of our hearts in all that we are and do. They model the call that

Whatever you do work at it with all your heart as working for the Lord

Col. 3: 23

Diligence like work has many facets. Some of us are called to be diligent in action, and others to listen. There is certainly a time and place for both as we see in Jesus' own ministry and revealed in his encounters with Mary and Martha and in the way he models of prayer.

For Prayer is something that in the habit of doing, inhabits us. A rule of life, which may start as a Lenten practice, can form and reform us as has been exemplified by spiritual writers for centuries and even more recently in Richard Harris's *Celebration of Discipline*. A book which commends us to be diligent in the practice the presence of God. We can do this by intentionally building our lives on a pattern of prayer, and in so doing to discover a freedom to thrive and grow that we often see in the world of nature.

And finally...diligence in nature

When we look at the diligence pane in the stained-glass window in the Rector's study we discover St Ambrose (340 AD to 397 AD). Not only was he one of the four traditional Doctors of the Church and the patron saint of Milan but is associated with promoting "antiphonal chant" and in contrast, as you may see on the postcard, he is associated with bees.

As legend goes, his father found face covered with bees when he was a child. This was taken as a sign of his future eloquence, or speaking with a "honeyed tongue."

Bees too are seen as an archetype of diligence, and one that mirrors the image of the body of Christ, into which we have been reminded today we are known, formed and called.

The diligence of the humble bee is ingrained into their own individual and cooperate being, so much so that being and doing are coexistent and each life and works in cohesion not competition, selfless and integral to the other.

Vivien Head's handbook on *Keeping Bees* speaks of these little powerful creatures representing a Superfamily.

"A single honeybee could not live for very long without the support of its colony or 'family'. A worker bee cannot reproduce, the queen bee is unable to produce the wax comb, collect pollen or even feed herself. And the drone's only role is to mate with the queen. That is why the honey bee needs to work as a single unit."¹

What a powerful all-consuming model of living, and dare I say, *being*, these little creatures present us, in our families, our churches and our own lives. Imagine if we lived like that? And really offered all that do, with all our heart, as working for the Lord. (Col 3: 23)

¹ *Keeping Bees: Looking after an Apiary* by Vivien Head (2012 edition) p10

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