



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 11:00 a.m.

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

on
John 3:1-17

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Via Crucis: Via Lucis

When I was a parish priest in the East end of London, my little Victorian Church of St Martin of Tours had a beautiful Rood Beam (Rood - R-O-O-D - is the old English word for the Cross) and on this carved beam that stretched from one side of the Chancel to the other, there was the most beautiful image of Christ on the cross with Mary, his mother on one side, and the beloved disciple on the other. The Rood beam was exquisitely decorated with stencilled patterns and gold and silver leaf. It was thought to have been made by the great Gothic Revival architect George Frederick Bodley, although no-one knew who designed the little Church. St Martin's was built at the height of the Anglo-Catholic Revival as a mission church within the ever-expanding expanding part of the East end. And in that church stencilled on that beautiful rood beam were these Latin words: *Sic Deus dilexit mundum...* So God loved the world. The words of Jesus that we heard today in the Gospel reading.

Day by day I entered my little Church and sat beneath the rood with those simple words: **So God loved the world.**

Those words became a touchstone for my ministry as a young priest I mixed with the people of the East end and their memories. That little Church had seen the great depression, Cholera, Diphtheria, and TB epidemics; it had seen two world wars and the devastation of the blitz; it also saw Bobbie Moore captain West Ham United whose stadium was across the road (and the only time England won the World Cup!); the arrival of thousands of immigrants from overseas; and the building of new hospitals and schools. There was also great tragedy – the memorial to those who died in the First World War in the church tells a shocking story of the loss of life when one reads the list of names of the young men who never came back. There was also great involvement in the local community – originally by the running of a parish school and with the nuns from the convent nearby providing midwifery and nursing, then to more contemporary involvement in support groups for abandoned Asian women, vulnerable young people, and those suffering from addiction. The story of that little church was passionate as it was colorful. It involved a meeting of cultures, of faith, and even of food; when the time came for me to leave more people ate curried goat than jellied eels. I saw the beginning of broad-based community organizing; mosques, temples, and the church coming together with schools, trade unions and others to campaign and lobby for common concerns in the community. I also saw the rise of the openly racist British National Party who tried to stir up hatred in my parish.

It was a parish that restored the Franciscan life in the Church of England. I read the diary of Father Andrew SDC, one of the first Franciscans professed in 1894 and how they were so deeply involved in the lives of the people who lived around them. Shockingly, I realized that the level of poverty and disadvantage that he described in his diary was just the same when I was the parish priest as it had been 100 years before. I buried too many babies, for the London borough of Newham had the highest infant mortality rate at that time in the country.

And day by day I sat beneath the Rood Beam to say my prayers and read the words “**So God loved the world**”.

At the heart of it all was God...is God, because God, for the Christian, is a God who yearns to be at the heart of community. I believe that it is no accident that the Franciscan life was recovered in such a parish as that and a place of real need. It is no accident that the Anglo-Catholic Revival was rooted in the cities and the slums of England because Jesus is found in the slums and in our need; the incarnation is exactly that. How sad that the catholic movement in the Anglican Communion seems more concerned with who should be allowed to do something or not and forgets its origins in the slums.

Last week I mentioned that the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness was also an echo of the forty years that the Hebrew tribes spent in the desert following the Exodus. During that long journey, they encountered many trials and tribulations but they regularly cheated on God or complained against Moses. The book of Numbers tells us of ‘fiery serpents’ that bit the people and many died. Commanded by God, Moses created a bronze serpent and placed it on a pole and anyone who was bitten who looked at it lived. That image of healing you might recognize for you will find to this day on the side of many ambulances in this city.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus used that very particular Jewish story to help Nicodemus understand how God would be involved in the heart of community; how God would reconcile the world to himself; what God would do if he came into the world: “*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*”

That’s the moment of revelation to Nicodemus – that God had come to down from heaven to bring life and redemption, not condemnation; to bring health and forgiveness, not despair. And, most important of all, that God would enter into that world, into its pain, into its dirt, and into its despair and flood that world with his love.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

Such love, my friends. Such generous love, poured out for you and for me.

John Austin Baker says this: “*There is no security in love...Love knows perfectly well that it may be cheated, laughed at, betrayed, vilified, tormented, even killed - or worse still, perhaps ignored, never even noticed. Love does not say ‘I affirm your absolute right to exist so long as you come up to my expectations,’ but simply: ‘I affirm your right to exist’. Just that. Nothing more.*”¹

So God loved the world.

Now, on the back of the Rood in my little Church of St Martin, there were more words stencilled in gold leaf but only the priest could see them when he or she turned back from the altar to look at the people during mass. The words were, in Latin, *Via crucis, via lucis*. Way of the cross: the way of light.

Isn't that strange. In the 1980s, we saw the creation of the 'Stations of the Resurrection' and they called the devotion the Via Lucis. But, one hundred years before, in my little church, someone had decided to put those words under the Rood, *Via Crucis: Via Lucis*. What it meant was that whenever I turned from the altar and I saw my congregation, and all that they represented, and all their cares and their worries, I and my other priestly colleagues would see the words "The Way of the Cross – the Way of Light."

One of the privileges of being your pastor is to get to know your stories; to get to know this city in which we live in and to walk its streets. Over the past few years I have got to know some of you quite well and some of you are, probably, waiting to share your story with me. And I, also, have shored something of my story with you. I went to a seminary that was quite traditional and we were taught how to be priests and they said, "Don't be afraid of being professional about being a priest," and they said "that's what God has called you to be." We were taught all kind of little things alongside our formation as priests and one of them was, when someone asks you to pray for them – do it straight away and not wait in case you forgot. Another thing they said was, "when you celebrate the mass day by day and someone says 'please pray for me,' or tells you a story and you are not quite sure what to do, you take it with you to the altar (as it were) and slip it under the paten so that when you pick up the bread and you remember what Jesus did, that story is there also, on the altar." You see, I am not just your pastor, I am also your priest which means that your stories are taken day by day to the altar. And what is the altar but a reminder not just of Holy Communion, but also of the sacrifice of Jesus.

So God loved the World.

Some of you have already walked the Way of the Cross more than once in your lives (and I don't mean the Stations of the Cross as we do on the Fridays of Lent); some of you will walk the Way of the Cross in your lives to come. No doubt, I will again and again. But the Way of the Cross is also the Way of Light. When Jesus carried the crossbeam to Calvary, he carried it into the darkness of human despair and, yet, he flooded it with the light of hope.

Nicodemus had struggled in his conversation with Jesus because he could only imagine things from his own world-view, and from within his own narrow religious experience – in his own time and from his own culture. Jesus offered him the chance to break out of that straight-jacket and take the risk of discovering God in a new and immediate way. As he walked the Way of the Cross to the darkness of Calvary, Jesus, God's Son - the Light of the World, would bring hope out of despair. Sometimes, my friends, we only see the darkness but the way of the cross for Jesus was charged with creative light. **So God loved the World.**

Some words of Oscar Romero:

"Christianity is not a collection of truths to be believed, of laws to be obeyed, of prohibitions. That makes it very distasteful. Christianity is a person, one who loved us so much, one who calls for our love. Christianity is Christ."

My friends, as we walk in his steps this Lent and Holy Week let us pray that we will discover the light of his presence, for God so loved the World.

¹ The foolishness of God - p140.