



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

Sunday, September 27, 2020
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 and Matthew 21:23-32
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Beclosed by God

Our Lord had a saying that has made its way to us in our time: “Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven,” he shall enter. He really wanted to drive this point home, the endemic mirage of words without action that encloses us, knowing that he needed to bring this crucial principle to life. And he does so repeatedly in his parables. You may remember the Pharisee (a paragon of faith) whose only prayer in the temple was thanksgiving for his own righteousness, while the Tax Collector for occupying Rome (a paragon of betrayal) is beside him praying only for God’s mercy upon his sinful life. What is said by their clothes and their outward-facing identities is so very different from what is being said within, in their prayers.

That contrast is also revealed in the choices of the priest and the Levite (a Jerusalem Brahmin) on the road to the Holy City. They neglect the needs of the mugged traveler, while the Samaritan, a scorned cousin in the faith, indeed cares for the traveler, above and beyond, with a sacrificial love that few would have predicted with a surface-reading of things.

And part of today’s gospel continues Christ’s efforts with us, Jesus asks his challengers a sort of multiple choice parable: the first son said he wouldn’t help his father in the vineyard, but do. The second son says he will help, but he doesn’t when the time comes. Ultimately, he asks, “Who did the will of their father?”

Come to think of it, they both made verbal commitments, they both made a vow to their father. And they both broke their vows. Their promises, their word evaporated as they lived their lives in their father’s vineyard. The truth of their lives, obscured by their words, is revealed as they work or *do not* work.

Later in the Gospel, our Lord speaks of the notoriously faithful as cups and platters that are shiny on the outside yet rotten on the inside, or like whitewashed walls which hide the entombed bones of dead men. And just after today’s parable, he points out, in contrast, the outwardly notorious sinners, the tax collectors and the prostitutes, as ones who are able to hear the preaching of John the Baptist and come to the waters of repentance, when others, the chief priests and elders, just couldn’t take him seriously, this child of a priest gone off-the-grid in the wilderness.

It seems that there is a liability that comes to being experienced in the faith, to being the eldest child, so to speak. You trust in the past convictions. You’ve built your life on following these, and in having a holy reputation. And as the supposed inheritor, you are invested in the status quo, in this case preserving the life

of the Temple and the Holy City elites. You are also invested in the status quo because you can't fathom the joy of being wrong, only the horror. As for the younger children, so to speak, those coming to God anew without the veil of familiarity, there is so much more maneuverability of the spirit, after all, there is nothing to lose in terms of your own faithful identity, no lifetime of trusting that you are righteous or good, little reputation to lose, and much more to gain, perhaps, in joining John in the Jordan, in following Jesus on the Way.

The reading from the prophet Ezekiel reminds me of how much this conservative Temple priest had to endure, how much he had to lose in seeing his Temple, the first one, burned and laid to waste by Nebuchadnezzar, and then to be forcibly deported to the bank of a Babylonian canal. How he, as a priest so set in his ways, could manage the colossal spiritual task of having a faith without the promised Temple in the promised land, how he could not fall into crushing depression and fatalism without having a true home and Temple in which to be a priest. This is someone who had the gift to see beyond the surface, beyond the appearances.

It appeared that the sins of fathers had cursed them forever, the bitter grapes of the past had left them nothing but sour wine and tears to drink in Babylon until their society was stamped out. But Ezekiel had the prophetic power to see beyond the surface, beyond the great "Never Again" that was seeming to be spoken through history itself. Their desolation was not a sign of their great sin and destruction, but was instead the stage for their restoration. He was the one who could hear God tell him, though the world seems to say otherwise, "I do not desire the death of you or my people. I desire to make in you a new heart and a new spirit."

Outside the Temple, even in a world without a Temple, Ezekiel's trust and hope endured. He could see the bones of the house of Israel, cut off from their parts, sun-scorched and scattered in the valley of death, he could see them put back together again, and not only that, given sinews and flesh, a home for that new heart, an abode for that new spirit, delivered from the grave, and brought back home from exile. Not everyone who says Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, and not everyone who is claimed by hellish kingdoms is lost forever.

When the chief priest and elders were asking Jesus by what sort of authority, by what power, he was doing and saying such bold things, the power that he was drawing from, in a simmering crisis of occupied Jerusalem, a kind of exile-in-place, is related to the authority of Ezekiel's vision in Babylon. Jesus could see the glorious Holy City and weep in sorrowful understanding of what was going on under the revered surface. He could parade into the city on a donkey as a counter-vision to the Roman war parades, taking the wind from the occupiers' sails, if only for a moment. He knew how interrupting the stoning of a notorious sinner would reveal our kinship in sin, and universal need for God's mercy. He knew how turning over the money-changers' tables in the Temple would briefly demonstrate how fragile the oppressive financial system was. He knew how a shriveling fig tree could demonstrate the tenuousness of the entire great Temple Mount. His power was in uniting the truth of the inner reality of God's blessings with his teaching, his parables, and his bold actions, unity of word and speech and action, unity of life and love, in a place where many of those things had become untethered, scattered, like bones in a valley.

Those things on the surface, those appearances, they look so substantial, but do you see how ephemeral they are when you compare them to ultimate things? If the shell has no meat within, it crumbles. The words we say, our promises, ultimately evaporate if contradicted by the way we live our lives. The things that happen to us, the past, everything we expect, can be turned on its head, reversed, by an act of God, or even by our saying yes to God, an inbreaking of the divine power into our hearts. The broken promises and failures of the present time can be transfigured by the ultimate promise of God to restore and rescue. But if we are only focused on the surface, without the prayer and devotion to seek what is coursing behind the scenes in the Spirit, we will mistake what is apparent for what is real, in countless ways. What looks beautiful could be ugly within. And vice versa. What seems solid ground is shifting sand, and vice versa. Who really knows? God

only knows! Perhaps dwelling on this uncertainty is troubling. But I hope you are also drawn to see how much room for hope and promise is found in a realm such as ours, where the Spirit moves where it will, in us and others: where our past does not determine God's future, where what is said can be redeemed by what is done, whether in heaven or earth, where sin and failure do not constrain grace and mercy, where it is not over until it is over, and that End is a Good Ending. For me, the Good News of God in Christ, along with the Good Ending of his ultimate return, is that every crisis is actually an occasion to see a layer of things peeled away, giving us a chance to glimpse the power of God underneath, beyond, and in all things, in our time. So that what is experienced as desolation and exile, in Ezekiel's case and perhaps ours in this pandemic, a sort of exile in place, that that place in the spirit can be revealed to be the stage for our restoration, for hearts newly expanded to fill newly broken and newly open spaces, the time for God to give us new spirits to live into, and love into, what is next. Perhaps, in closing, Dame Julian of Norwich can help us with one of her reflections of this divine love.

The Goodness of God is the highest prayer, and it cometh down to the lowest part of our need. It quickeneth our soul and bringeth it on life, and maketh it for to waxen in grace and virtue. It is nearest in nature; and readiest in grace: for it is the same grace that the soul seeketh, and ever shall seek till we know verily that he hath us all in himself beclosed.

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For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the whole, so are we, soul and body, clad in the Goodness of God, and enclosed.

May we, uniting holy word and holy deed, bound up in prayer together, already enclosed in God's goodness, make ever more room within for that new spirit, and that new heart, in a world in which we know so little, holding fast to the One who knows us so very well.