



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**May 16, 2021**  
*The Seventh Sunday of Easter*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by s  
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner

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### **Taking the Gospel to the World**

When people come and gaze at the reredos of St Thomas Church – one of the largest altar pieces in the world at 80 feet tall and 43 feet wide - they marvel at the many carved images and intricate gothic tracery, but are often puzzled when they see the large empty cross in the centre which is so plain and austere. Originally, it was to have been an image of the Lord dying on the Cross with his mother and the Beloved Disciple standing by, but it was decided to copy the original altarpiece of the third church that burned in 1913. Above the empty cross, we see a figure of the Ascended Christ in glory. Jesus wears both priestly and royal robes of state; he is holding an orb and blessing the world and, instead of the crown of thorns, he wears a crown fit for a King or an Emperor. Unusually, Our Lady and the Beloved Disciple who normally would stand by Christ crucified, still stand either side – but this time, either side of their ascended Lord. There is, therefore, something powerful about the juxtaposition of these images of the Cross and the Ascended, glorified Lord.

There are many who believe that the Ascension of Christ somehow does away with the pain of Calvary – that it reverses the awfulness of the cross – but this is not the faith of the Church. The great theologian, John Macquarrie, said this: “*The ascension is not a separate event, indeed we shall see that in an important sense it is one and the same as the humiliation of Christ; or rather, these two are opposite sides of the same event.*” (Principles of Christian Theology). I remember the Dean of Melbourne some years ago preaching at St Thomas Church on Ascension Day and, pointing to the great reredos, suggested that there are, in fact *two* Ascensions of Christ – his Ascent to the Cross and his Ascension into heaven. So now we begin to see the power of these two images – the Cross and the Ascended, glorified Lord – and how they belong together.

When Jesus appeared in the upper room on the day of Resurrection in John’s Gospel, the first thing he did was to show the disciples his hands and his side. There is no getting away from it – the glory of God is revealed in Jesus through his resurrection *and* his death on the Cross. When Jesus was taken from his disciples, he raised his hands to bless them. What would they have seen? The marks of the nails - the wounds of love which are signs of glory. And as the Lord ascended beyond their sight, so the disciples saw the wounds taken into heaven to transform and transfigure the cosmos – consecrating all time and space. Michael Ramsey used to teach that it is important to hold together the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the giving of the Holy Spirit as if they were one event – God’s glory is revealed through each of them and, yet, each individual event needs the other in order for that glory to be revealed. And that glory, Jesus shared with his disciples as he prayed to the Father:

*“Father...the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”*

**The glory that you have given me I have given them...**but the glory of the risen, ascended, and glorified Lord is still found in the marks of the nails.

In the power of the spirit, and in union with Christ, we too can pray to can pray to the Father and experience his glory. But it will come at a cost. The intimate prayer of Jesus to the Father is not just about glory (and certainly not about glory in human terms) it is a prayer that acknowledged that the world will hate those who truly follow him and bear witness to him.

There is a common misunderstanding of this passage from John’s Gospel. Christians can get fixated on Jesus’ words *“they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”* This text is often used to justify a life somehow separated from the real world and, more importantly, how Christians should avoid being involved in the affairs of the world, and especially not to mix their faith with what is often described as ‘politics’. However, Jesus does not say that we are to live apart from the world but, rather, that we are not ‘of the world. In fact, he says very clearly in his prayer to the Father, *“I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world,”* and, *“I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.”* To bear witness to Jesus in the world is both costly and dangerous. In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles that we heard on Thursday, the disciples are asked why they are gazing into the sky! There is work to be done! The Lord expected his disciples to be involved in the world and that involvement would come at a cost – a cost that he, himself, experienced shortly after that beautiful prayer. That cost would also be experienced by his friends. How significant that from the earliest of days, the Church has been persecuted and, even now as I preach, Christians around the world are being called to bear witness with their lives, including fragile ancient communities in the middle East, suffering terribly. In the early Church, the martyrs were known as the ‘seed of the church.’

Last week, we thought about how the church so quickly became counter-cultural - challenging all the stereotypes, rules, and principles that had been held dear for so long. Why? Because the early followers of Jesus Christ did not separate themselves from the world. Quite the contrary, they travelled the world and told the Good News of liberation through life in Christ Jesus. And more than that, their life in Christ also demanded putting their faith into action and making a difference. The irony is that it is only when the church becomes complacent, wealthy, powerful, aloof to injustice, and apart from the world that it is most in danger of becoming ‘of the world. Some say that when the Emperor Constantine finally allowed Christianity to become established in the Roman Empire, that it was the greatest challenge to the Church’s mission and the true glory of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord.

Oscar Romero once preached, *“Some want to keep a Gospel so disembodied that it doesn’t get involved at all in the world it must save. Christ is now in history. Christ is in the womb of his people. Christ is now bringing about the new heaven and the new earth.”* (Sermon – December 3, 1978)

Last week I mentioned the witness of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in standing up to the injustice of apartheid in South Africa; one example of putting faith into practice. There were times when he was criticized for mixing religion and politics – of getting too involved in the affairs of the world and the affairs of the state. In 1988, at a time of civil unrest, President Botha of South Africa gave Desmond Tutu a statement asking whether church leaders were, as he put it, *“acting on behalf of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom promise by the ANC and the South African Communist party.”*

Tutu responded in a beautifully crafted letter:

*"I know that I stand in the main line Christian tradition... My theological position derives from the Bible and from the teaching of the church." (And you can imagine the twinkle in his eye as he went on to say) "The Bible and the church pre-date Marxism and the ANC by several centuries."*

He then went on to say,

*"The aim of the church is to bring about social justice. Justice must be done to the poor and the oppressed, and if the present system does not serve this purpose, the public conscience must be roused to demand another. If the church does not exert itself for justice in society, and together with the help she can offer also be prepared to serve as champion for the cause of the poor, others will do it. The poor have the right today: I do not ask for your charity, but I ask to be given an opportunity to live a life of human dignity."*

At his Ascension, Jesus charged his followers to bear witness to him and go out into the world and proclaim the Good News. We forget, at our peril, that the first sermon that Jesus preached in Luke's Gospel was from a text of the prophet Isaiah – *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* (Luke 4:18-21)

The wounds of love on the body of the risen Lord are still fresh, and Jesus presents them continually before the face of his heavenly Father; the church's mission is to bear witness to those wounds of love and to bear witness to his Resurrection; to reveal God's glory shining through what the world still sees as weak, and to live lives of love-filled service. Or, as our mission statement puts it – to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ which, of course, Jesus asks us to do outside as well as inside this beautiful House of Prayer.

Jesus prayed to the Father, *"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth."*