



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

July 18, 2021

The Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
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‘He restores my soul’

“The Lord is my shepherd : therefore can I lack nothing. He shall feed me in a green pasture : and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort.”

I have been thinking about the image of God as a Shepherd over this past week. I grew up in the North of England, in Yorkshire. It is the largest county in England and one of the most beautiful with not one but *two* National Parks of incredible beauty. As a teenager I loved walking in the Yorkshire Dales, with its dry-stone walls, and sheep, and shepherds. Some years later, I found myself working in the beautiful and glorious Devon countryside of the southwest of England which has the largest number of livestock in the United Kingdom. Again, the image of the shepherd became a powerful one every time the choir sang the 23rd psalm.

The psalmist speaks of the intimacy of the relationship between God as Shepherd and we, his people: *“He shall feed me in a green pasture : and lead me forth beside the waters of comfort.”*

But what do these ‘water of comfort’ mean? In other translations of the bible, we discover what is comforting about them; they are described as ‘quiet waters’ (NIV), and ‘still waters’ (NKJV and NRSV). If you have been to Yorkshire, Devon, or the Catskills, or the Finger Lakes, you know how a stream can become a raging torrent – as we saw in those terrible images of flooding in Germany this past week. Quite simply, sheep can’t cope with a raging torrent, and the shepherd has a responsibility to find them restful pasture and still waters.

In our Gospel story today, we see that played out in the ministry of Jesus as he cared for the poor and the marginalized. *“He saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”*

Now, remember that the word compassion in the original Greek is a very, very powerful word. It comes from the word for the *guts* or intestines that are being churned up or twisted. It is, quite literally, a visceral feeling. This is not Jesus being meek and mild and sympathetic – Jesus is moved in his very being – God is moved when we suffer. And in our Gospel, Jesus is exhausted from the care that he is giving. But did you notice at the beginning of the passage how he cared for his disciples? He had sent them out on a mission and, on their return, he acknowledged that they would also be exhausted: *“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”*

“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters;” why? The psalmist tells us why – “*he shall convert my soul.*” And what does *that* mean? Other translations also make it clear – “*he restoreth my soul.*” (KJV)

A number of times in the Gospels, Jesus took himself to a deserted place to pray. He sought solitude, stillness, and silence because it allowed him to be that Good Shepherd and to care for his flock.

It is almost a throwaway line - *Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while* – we can easily ignore because of the urgency of the crowd and the busyness of this scene in Mark’s gospel. But it is crucial for all of us to hear the words of Jesus that we need to rest a while. Why? Because it is rooted in the very fabric of our existence; being busy is not always the answer to being productive [this is where the preacher preaches to himself].

In the Book of Genesis, in the first story of creation, God creates the universe in six days and, as we read, “*on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*” (Genesis 2:2-3) Thus, sabbath rest is not simply about not doing work; after all, Jesus regularly criticized the hypocrisy of the Pharisees O.C.D. approach to sabbath law. Rather, it is about *participating* in the life of the Creator who chose to rest a while.

Thus, the Church community cannot be all activity and work – even with the urgency of making new disciples. It must never forget the need to rest a while and to pray; to be those ‘still waters’ in a world that seems to be ever more turbulent.

Our strategic plan at Saint Thomas will only succeed if we have this balance in our common life as well as in our individual lives. We cannot simply be about ‘doing things’ – that is why our beautiful Church building is so much a part of our strategic plan, for it reminds us of the invitation of Jesus to rest a while or, as the Lord says to us in another psalm to “*be still and know that I am God.*” (Ps. 46:10a)

Writing on the website ‘Unheard’ last week, Giles Frazer said this:

*“Secularisation is indeed a catastrophe for the churches. But we won’t outlast this period of history by being more business-like or by adopting slicker models of evangelistic marketing. We won’t be saved by panicky spread-sheet evangelists. Indeed, we must be more of what we have been called to be – more thoughtful, more prayerful, less fearful, more obedient to God’s call.”*¹

This is the gift of Saint Thomas to midtown Manhattan and to the world. We can be an oasis of prayer in the heart of the busiest metropolis in the world. We can deepen our activity and our mission by rooting it in those words of Jesus to ‘rest a while.’ And especially by forming the young in this tradition, and by practicing it ourselves we will become people of stillness. It seems counter-intuitive, but it will actually strengthen our mission and deepen our faith and our fellowship.

Let me end by giving you an example.

Many years ago, when I worked in London, I was interviewed for a job at the Royal Foundation of St. Katherine, a retreat center in Limehouse, East London, founded in 1147. When founded, it was, of course, in beautiful countryside; however, when I went to visit in the 1990s, it had been swallowed up by the expansion of inner-city London; several railway lines, the London Underground, and large and busy roads surrounded it. And to top it all, opposite the center was a *cement factory* with large trucks coming and going all day!

I was talking to a Franciscan sister about this and complaining that I couldn’t possibly run a retreat center with all that noise. “So where do *you* go on retreat then, Carl?” she said. “A Cistercian Abbey in the middle

of nowhere,” I grandly replied. She paused, looked me up and down and said slowly, “Well, at least you can afford to travel there. But *if you can’t find stillness in the city then how do you expect others to find it?*”

So I went for my interview and found myself in the chapel of the center. The noise from the road nearby was constant; I could hear the screech of the subway trains which travelled above ground nearby and the beeping of the cement trucks reversing out of the concrete factory. I was agitated and wondered how on earth anyone could find stillness and peace in this place. I shut my eyes and tried an exercise an old spiritual director had advised many years before; instead of allowing the sound to annoy me and agitate me, I actually listened to them, accepted them, and even incorporated them into my prayer. Instead of fighting them I found myself becoming calmer. And then it happened! It was as sudden as a brilliant flash of sunlight on a dreary day; in the retreat house garden, a *blackbird* lifted up her voice and sang the most beautiful and thrilling song.

It was breath-taking. It was melodic and very, very pure. After listening for a few moments, I realized that I had stopped struggling with the noise of the traffic and the trains and the cement trucks; the little blackbird had drowned them all out with her song and I was grateful – so very grateful to have been taught a lesson: **Stillness is not an absence of noise but the centering of the soul on God.**

We, too, have the chance to discover stillness and solitude even here in New York – actually, *especially* here in New York.

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.*

Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.

Stillness is not an absence of noise but the centering of the soul on God.

In the name of the father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

^{1.} [https://unherd.com/2021/07/the-church-is-abandoning-its-flock/?fbclid=IwAR1IofWvVuM6QIpBKQvfKFrRbYca1pQAInWFuJvfQUxSg\\$TUqt4uqviRn0](https://unherd.com/2021/07/the-church-is-abandoning-its-flock/?fbclid=IwAR1IofWvVuM6QIpBKQvfKFrRbYca1pQAInWFuJvfQUxSg$TUqt4uqviRn0)