



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

Sunday, September 12, 2021
Patronal Feast Day

Solemn Eucharist & Procession
11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Habakkuk 2:1-4, Hebrews 10:35-11:1, and John 20:24-29
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The Mustard Seed of Faith

Yesterday was the 20th anniversary of 9/11. In a pastoral message, speaking about how people dealt with the aftermath of 9/11, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said this:

"Memories of that tender cooperation—of love for each other as neighbors—serve as guiding lights for the present. Amidst the ongoing pandemic and natural disasters that have taken so many lives and pushed first responders to their limits, and amidst a worldwide reckoning with the sin of racism, we are called to become the Beloved Community whose way of life is the way of Jesus and his way of love."

My friends, that way of love we boldly proclaim today in this Church. This is the greatest gift of the Church to the world – the way of Jesus; a way that can bring reconciliation, peace, and hope to our seemingly broken world. Our first lesson, our psalm, and our epistle reading all speak of hope, looking forward to a new creation where things are done according to God's way and not our way:

"Look at the proud!" says the prophet Habakkuk, *"Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith."*

"Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy." says the psalmist.

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," says the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Faith is not a set of beliefs or a catechism, but a gift from God – a charism; a seed planted in each one of us waiting to be nurtured. In Luke's Gospel, the apostles say to Jesus, *"Increase our faith!"* And the Lord said, *"If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."* (Luke 17:5-6)

I was surprised a few days ago to receive an email from a name that seemed very familiar; as I read the email, I realized it was from someone I first met 36 years ago. He was a young teen in my youth group when I was first a young curate in Leigh-on-Sea in Essex. Now he is a father of several children. He wanted to share some exchanges with his friends from that time on Facebook about his faith. We have not been in touch since I left that parish, but it was the way he signed off his email that struck me. He simply said, *"Mustard seeds from over 30 years ago..."*

When our faith feels weak, we need not fear; since faith is given to us as a gift from God's goodness, no matter how small that faith may seem, it is nevertheless enough to open us to the way of God's love.

Do you remember that pitiful story in Mark's Gospel of the man whose little boy is possessed by an evil spirit that has also made the boy deaf and dumb from birth? ¹. The disciples try to cast it out but fail. The father describes in graphic detail to Jesus what for us, today, sounds very much like epileptic seizures. His helplessness is so moving and he says to Jesus, *"If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."* Jesus then says something that some would hear as a rebuke, *"If you can! All things are possible to him who believes."* But immediately comes the beautiful response of the desperate father, *"I believe; help my unbelief!"*

"I believe; help my unbelief!"

Which, of course, brings us to Saint Thomas. *"Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."* Poor Thomas, so often described as 'doubting Thomas' when in actual fact, he is the grieving and loving friend of the Lord who is desperate to see him. Remember that Thomas had strong faith: Not long before Jesus was betrayed and arrested, as he went to Bethany to the grave of his friend, Lazarus, when the Pharisees and Scribes were plotting to kill Jesus, Thomas said to the other disciples, *"Let us also go, that we may die with him."* (John 11:16) Those are not the words of a doubter, but one who is attuned to the way of Jesus – faithful to his way of love. That same love expressed in Thomas' words in the upper room when Jesus told his disciples not to be troubled because he was going to prepare a place for them; *"Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"* said Thomas, to which Jesus replied, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him."* (see John 14¹-7)

Henceforth you know him and have seen him.

In another upper room, the Risen Lord appeared to Thomas. The Gospel does not say that Thomas even needed to touch the Lord's wounds, instead, the spark of his faith is fanned into full flame as he exclaims, *"My Lord and my God!"*

Today, still in a pandemic, 20 years since 9/11, with natural disasters happening close to home and around the world, we, the people of Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, are called to fan the flame of our own sometimes weak faith and to be like Thomas, *not* doubting but believing. Over the past 18 months, so much has happened in spite of the pandemic. Our strategic plan is no longer hopes and dreams, it is a way of life that we are already living. The goals of that strategic plan are being put into action. And for those who are worried that we are becoming a bit too 'corporate' in our language, remember that Jesus also had a plan; the apostles had a plan; the mission of spreading the Good News requires good planning and faithful service. However, unlike many corporate businesses or even mid-size not-for-profits, the heart of our strategic plan is our mission to **worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ through the Anglican tradition and our unique choral heritage**. Our strategic plan is quite simply to live out that mission to the best of our ability.

That is why we celebrate the Choir School today and welcome a new Head of School in Christopher Seeley. That is why we begin a project to share our musical expertise with local children by forming another choir for boys and girls who cannot be part of our Choir of Men and Boys. That is why we celebrate the ministry of Fr. Moretz who becomes a lynch-pin in helping our parish and school thrive and grow through our strategic plan by giving him the title 'Vicar.' But it is more than a title, it is a reminder that we all have a part of play, working together for the common good of our parish and school and striving towards a more excellent way. That is why we celebrate the new role of Mother Turner as School Chaplain and the strengthening of the bonds of affection across parish and school. That is why we celebrate the creation of a new Board of Trustees for our school which will give robust and independent leadership at a time of challenge and change. **That is why we celebrate our Patronal Feast today** – because we affirm our mission and our place here in New York, turning challenges into opportunities, and strangers into friends. Or, as Bishop Curry has said,

"We are called to become the Beloved Community whose way of life is the way of Jesus and his way of love."

¹. Mark 9:14-29