



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

Sunday, October 3, 2021

The Feast of Dedication

*Procession and Solemn Pontifical Eucharist with
Confirmation and Reception
11am*

+
A Sermon by
The Right Rev. Allen K. Shin, *Bishop Suffragan*
on
John 4:19-24
+

Anniversary of the Feast of Dedication

Good morning. It is good to be with you this morning. If I remember it correctly, I think I was scheduled to visit St. Thomas during Holy Week last year and then during Holy Week this year. This is a long-awaited visitation. Sunday visitations are the best and the most important part of the bishop's job, certainly more than all the zoom meetings that have been filling up my calendar. If I had no more meetings for the rest of my life, that'll make me very happy. It is indeed wonderful to celebrate with you the anniversary of the feast of dedication of this famous house of worship, and to top it off celebrate Confirmation and Reception as well.

The church foremost is the people, not the building, as important an asset and a tool as it may be. The building does not make the body of Christ, the people do. So let me first thank all of you in the pews and online for joining us for worship today and for your faithful commitment to this very important parish of the diocese.

These 18 months have been very tough for the clergy in our parishes. So I also would like to thank your rector, Fr. Carl Turner, for his wonderful leadership during this very challenging time, and all the clergy and the staff and lay leaders of the parish for their faithful service and care. Well done!

Some years ago, when I was serving as Chaplain of Keble College Oxford, I had an interesting encounter with a group of A-level students. The chaplain of a nearby school wanted to bring the students of his religion class to visit this famous chapel and asked me if I could spend some time with them, telling them about the chapel and the history of the Anglo-Catholic movement. So they came one morning and I gave my brief talk. At the Q & A time, a student raised her hand and asked, "Why did they build such a big and expensive building, when Jesus clearly said 'Sell everything and give to the poor.' Wouldn't it be more in line with Jesus' teaching to sell this building and use that money to take care of the poor?" It was a clever and challenging question for an A-level student. My internal reaction at the time was that either she was clueless about religion, or she was an evangelical with an agenda, or both.

I talked about the importance of worship and that the building was also an important expression of thank-offering to God for those who built it. I also talked about the Victorian sense of grandeur in the age of Industrial Revolution, the period when the Chapel was built. She looked neither convinced nor satisfied. The

chaplain quickly broke in and said they needed to get back to school, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The question, however, has lingered in the back of my mind.

The Samaritan woman in today's Gospel story is also raising a question regarding the place of worship, not exactly the same but still challenging. From her earlier conversation with Jesus, she recognized Jesus to be a man of prophetic insight and spiritual power. So, she says, "You must be a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain. But you are saying that Jerusalem is the place where people must worship."

If you thought Anglicans suffered from a rubrical neurosis, this woman clearly did, too. What if her entire religion was invalid because she and her people had been worshipping in the wrong place? Perhaps trying to put her at ease, Jesus says, "There will come a time when people will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." I bet this confused her even more.

If someone had told me two years ago that the Episcopalians in this diocese would worship neither in their church buildings nor outdoors in the park but on Facebook, Youtube or Zoom, I would have been very skeptical and disturbed and laughed it off as a joke. Well, it looks like the joke is on me and on us.

Then Jesus goes on with some ethereal talk about worshipping in spirit and truth and ends by saying, "God is spirit; and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." What are we to make of this?

Both spirit and truth are important words in John's Gospel, and both have everything to do with God. Just before today's story of the Samaritan woman at the well is the story of Nicodemus in which Jesus tells this Roman centurion about the importance of being born of the spirit. I am sure this left Nicodemus scratching his head in confusion.

Later in the Gospel at the Last Supper Jesus teaches the disciples in a lengthy discourse about the spirit, the Comforter, the Advocate and the Spirit of truth whom Jesus will send and who will guide and lead them into all truth. This, I am sure, also left the disciples scratching their heads in confusion.

The word, truth, occurs more than 20 times in John's Gospel, and it has more than anything else to do with Jesus, especially with his crucifixion death and resurrection. In the Passion story, at the end of his interrogation of Jesus, Pilate asks this famous question, "What is truth?" What follows is a palpable silence from Jesus who is quickly handed over to be crucified. The answer to Pilate's question, "What is truth?" is everything that happens to Jesus from that point on.

One time or another in one form or another most of us have asked the same question, only to be met by silence as well. Just as Pilate did, we simply get on with the next thing we must do. Just as Pilate was, we are often blind to the truth unfolding right in front of our face. So as the Gospel ends, the evangelist says, "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true." So, what is truth? Jesus Christ crucified and risen!

In our postmodern context, Truth with a capital "T" and Spirit with a capital "S" are suspect. Everything is relative to individual rights and freedom of opinion and beliefs. Everyone is spiritual even if they have no spiritual discipline to speak of, and everyone holds a truth even if it is based on alternative facts.

The spirit and the truth which John is trying to convey in his Gospel is not just any personal spirit and truth but the very essence of God, which is embodied and revealed in Jesus Christ on the Cross. And that is Love with a capital "L." If the Passion of Jesus Christ is any indication, this love of God does not come wrapped in a tidy, sentimental package. Rather, it is messy, unpredictable, and even bloody at times, yet overwhelmingly and deeply holy, gracious and life-transforming.

The spirit and the truth which Jesus was trying to convey to the Samaritan woman was actually right there in his generous interaction with her, which transformed this gentile woman with whom he should have had nothing to do. Unbeknownst to her, she was in a way already worshipping God in spirit and truth.

The world today is crying out for this healing and life-transforming Love with a capital “L.” I think we are experiencing a collective trauma of sorts in our society. The most urgent task for the church today is how we can be instruments of healing love and peace. We have a wonderful example of that in St. Francis of Assisi whose feast we will celebrate tomorrow. Unfortunately, the feast of St. Francis has come to be all blessing of the animals. Don’t get me wrong. I love animals. I have the most beautiful and the smartest cocker spaniel in the world. But, we should not forget that the feast of St. Francis is really about the sacrificial love of Christ crucified.

So today as we renew our Baptismal Covenant and recommit ourselves to Jesus along with the ten candidates for confirmation and two for reception, we rededicate not only this beautiful house of prayer but also ourselves, our souls and bodies, to God in the spirit and in the truth of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. There is no rubric that should make us neurotic about this worship. We can only come just as we are as sinners before God in the spirit of poverty and in the truth of our brokenness in order that we may be healed and made whole again in the image of God.

May God bless all of you, those being confirmed and received today and each and everyone of you in your journey of faith that you may become the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ in this world!