



**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)**

**Sunday, January 23, 2022**  
*The Third Sunday After the Epiphany*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

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**‘Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else’s opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.’ *Oscar Wilde*<sup>1</sup>**

At the 9am mass this morning, I asked the children what they wanted to be when they grow up. Two wanted to be doctors, another a veterinarian, one a police officer, but the most creative was ‘the first woman to land on the planet Jupiter!’

Mother Turner once told me, *“When I was at college, one of my tutors remarked, ‘We always ask children what they want to be when they grow up, and never what they want to be NOW.’”*

In the same vein we often hear adults discussing the place of children in the church and repeating that tired old phrase *“oh yes, children are important because they are the future of the Church”* whilst forgetting that they are *not* the future of the Church; because they *are* the Church, enriching the Assembly *because* of their presence now and not because of what they might become one day.

The same can be true of all of us who have a tendency to be constantly worrying about what the future holds and troubled by the memories of the past only to find that we are missing the reality of the present moment. *We* also need to celebrate who we *are* and not whom we might become or, worse, what others think we should become. Worse still is feeling the disappointment of parents or teachers or even society itself because we have not lived up to their expectations. ‘There can be a kind of inevitability in so many peoples’ lives which can lead to despair

Some of you may know Philip Larkin’s poem ‘*This be the verse*’ with its infamous first line that can never be quoted in the pulpit, about our parents’ responsibility for stifling potential. As Larkin says,  
“...They fill you with the faults they had  
And add some extra, just for you.” ...  
“Man hands on misery to man...”

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we read of the consequences of sin being passed on to the children. When God’s glory passed by Moses on Mount Sinai, God proclaimed, *“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious...but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.”* (see Exodus 34:6b-7)

This idea of consequences being visited up children and children’s children is ancient but, following the Babylonian Exile, we begin to see a challenge to that notion; in the prophecy of Jeremiah we read *“In those*

*days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge."* (Jeremiah 31:29) In other words, we are responsible for our own actions, and should not pay the price for other peoples' mistakes.

All this finds its fulfilment in the person of Jesus, who challenged the idea that bad things are a consequence of the sinfulness of ones' parents. In John's Gospel, when Jesus meets the man blind from birth, his disciples reveal how they are still very much bound in that old way of thinking when they say to him, "*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*" (John 9:2b) They thought that the man's physical disability was a consequence of something bad in the past; and that it was inevitable that he would never be seen as worthy or whole as long as he was blind.

The disciples are acting like the man who was training to be a switchman on the Long Island railway. After many weeks of training, the man had his practical exam. The examiner stood with him before the control board and said "*So, Jim, you have two trains on the same piece of track travelling towards each other at 60 miles an hour. Quick! What do you do?*" The man scratched his head, turned to the examiner and calmly said, "*Well, I guess I'd call my brother.*" "*Call your brother?*" cried the examiner, "*why would you do that?*" "*Because he ain't seen a train wreck before!*"

The heart of the gospel message is that it is *not* inevitable that things *will* go wrong. Jesus came to put an end to the inevitable consequences of sin and the fall, and in his very person. In that most significant encounter in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus took the scroll and quoted from the prophecy of Isaiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.'*

Why were the eyes of all fixed on him? Because this was his home town, folk knew him, the synagogue was probably filled with his own family and friends. It was also filled with their expectations. They knew Jesus. They knew all about him; they had watched him grow up, and they had hopes about what he might become. Wasn't he the carpenter's son? How come he wasn't in his dad's carpenter's workshop like any other faithful son? When Jesus rolled up the scroll and sat down, no wonder all eyes were on him. And what did he say? "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" How? In himself. When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary in Nazareth, he had told her that she should call her son, Jesus, for his name would reveal what he would be when he grew up – The Savior.

Jesus came to reverse the consequences of the fall and to bring release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, that is the year of Jubilee. Now, we read in the Book of Leviticus every fifty years there was to be a Jubilee year when all debts were cancelled, slaves released, and most significantly, land ownership given back to God (see Leviticus Chapter 25) Such a Jubilee year the Rabbis think never, ever happened because it was too hard to put into practice. But Jesus proclaims that year of Jubilee is now here and in himself, the one who would save his people from their sins.

Jesus was saying, and is still saying, that it is not okay for people to be oppressed by powerful people, to suffer prejudice because of their physical disability, or to be trapped in cycles of despair. Jesus was saying, and is still saying, that this planet, the land, belongs to God and not to us; that it is not okay to destroy it and pollute it; Jesus was saying, and is still saying, that it is not okay to keep people in debt; to put people down; to enslave them; to traffick them; to exploit them, to abuse them; because he knew in his very self that was, and is, not the way that God intends things to be. As Archbishop Michael Ramsey once famously said, "*It was the okay that crucified Jesus.*"

The example of Jesus is one who does not accept the Status Quo, who does not accept inevitability; he touched the lepers, he talked with prostitutes, he dined with tax collectors, he commissioned women as

disciples, and he placed a child in the midst of his disciples as the greatest sign of the kingdom; and even the grave could not contain him, as he reversed the consequences of the fall from grace and, instead, flooded the world and you and me with the possibility of new life in him. The carpenter's son from Nazareth did, indeed, get to practice his craft one last time before his death, when he received the cross beam and changed its purpose from an ugly symbol of humanity's hate and into a sign of liberation and redemption.

Jesus chose the most absurd people to be his first followers. He chose them because he could truly see their potential - and he sees ours too – he calls us – you and me - to become fully alive in him and to strive to reach our full potential, and not to pretend to be someone we are not. To become more like him who, as we read in Paul's Letter to the Colossians, 'is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.' (Colossians 1:15) He challenges us to make a difference today. As the nineteenth century poet Emily Dickinson put it "*There is always one thing to be grateful for - that one is one's self and not somebody else*". Jesus calls us to be true to ourselves and to be united in him, the firstborn of all creation.

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<sup>1</sup> De Profundis, 1905, p. 63