

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

---

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

Sunday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
Easter Day

Procession and Solemn Eucharist  
8 a.m.

+

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

*on*

John 20:1-18

+

## Words, words, words!

*"If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."*

It is said that you are legitimately famous if a Wikipedia page under your name exists in more than 25 languages. I remember when Facebook and Twitter were still very new and how many people I knew were boasting of the number of friends or followers they had, and the number of 'likes' that they were receiving to the things that they were posting. Currently, Barack Obama is ranked at number 1 in the Twitter stakes, way ahead of the number 2 - Justin Bieber. It is, though, much easier to be the number 1 in the Facebook world, since the number of friends one can have is capped at 5000. However, you are also allowed *followers* as well as friends, and that's where the stakes really get high, with the Manchester United soccer player, Cristiano Ronaldo currently at the top of the leader board. Though, I am not quite so sure how sincere all these followers are, since the person with the next highest number of followers is...Mr. Bean who, of course, doesn't really exist!

*"If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied,"* says St. Paul. In many respects, nothing has changed since Paul wrote those words to the infant Church in Corinth – a church that struggled with social class and snobbery; with status and a craving for the more dramatic gifts of the Spirit. The snobbery even revealed itself over loyalty to different leaders of the Church. In his first paragraphs, Paul appeals to the Corinthians to abandon such divisions and quarrelling. He says, *"What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"* (1 Corinthians 1:12-13). And he goes on to say, *"Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power."* (1 Corinthians 1:17)

The Power of the Cross. My friends, that is what we have celebrated and what we have proclaimed in this Holy Week. Not what the world counts as worthy or powerful – manipulating the truth; getting one's own way; putting people down; political might; invasion; nuclear deterrent; the list goes on and on... The world tells us that what really matters is being ahead of everyone else, of putting oneself first over the needs of others; of having the greatest number of followers, or friends, or likes. But this is not the way of the Christian.

Last night, at the Easter Vigil, seven adults and children were baptized. From their own mouth or through the mouths of their parents and godparents, seven made their baptismal covenant; seven chose a different path to the one preferred by the world; seven died to self because they died with Christ in order to share his resurrection glory. That is the life of the Christian – to bear witness to the world that the world does not revolve around me and my needs, and that there is a better way of living. Writing to the Colossians, Paul

says, “*Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*” (Colossians 3:2)

**Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.**

Throughout this week, Bishop Sentamu has set before us the example of Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus did not come to be a celebrity but, ironically after all that I have said, he *did* want to have friends and followers and he set them an example of how to be his friend or follower - to live a Jesus Christ shaped life; a life that is expressed in humility and self-sacrifice, not power and status, and certainly not in back-biting and division.

What we have proclaimed this past Holy Week is Christ Crucified whose Resurrected Body still bears the marks of the nails and the spear, for it is the eternal freshness of the wounds of love that are the answer to the deceit and corruption of the world today. And to those sacred wounds we point whenever we live lives of humble, love-filled service.

Sadly, sometimes the Church does not reveal Jesus Christ shaped lives even in its leaders, particularly when members of churches do not respect one another. I remember a prayer written by the Dean of St Albans, after he had been treated very badly by some leaders of the Church of England, which begins, “*Lord, do something about your Church. It is so awful, it is hard not to feel ashamed of belonging to it.*” It is not the sort of prayer we are used to hearing but, like the chant sung during the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday, its honesty challenges us to seek to follow Jesus and not our own self-interest. That kind of loving is not easy, and Jesus showed us the cost of true love. He also told his disciples that by modelling their lives on *his* example of love-filled service they would actually encounter resentment and bitterness. But that way of love is the way of Jesus, and loving others also means forgiving others. Even *this* we can find so difficult. As C.S. Lewis once said, “*Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea until he has something to forgive.*” (From ‘Mere Christianity’). Yes, even the church can become like world, when its words seem hollow or, worse, hypocritical.

Do you remember that wonderful 1960s musical “My Fair Lady?” In it, phonetics professor Henry Higgins takes on a challenge that he cannot turn a common Cockney working-class girl into a member of High Society. There is a wonderful moment when the character called Freddy, who has fallen for Eliza Doolittle, is trying to woo her and, in exasperation, Eliza interrupts him: “*Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do? Don’t talk of stars burning above; if you’re in love, show me!*” (*Eliza to Freddy in ‘My Fair Lady’*).

Words! Words! Words!

How does God show his love for us?

“*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.*” (John 1:14)

But we have not seen his glory as the world understand glory. God revealed his glory when Jesus took off his outer garment, and replaced it with a towel and stooped down to take the place of the slave when he washed his disciples’ feet. God revealed his glory when, in the garden of Gethsemane, and his followers drew weapons, and one of them, Peter, struck first, Jesus told them to put away their swords. God revealed his glory when the soldiers mocked Jesus and plaited a crown of thorns for his head and scourged him, and when Jesus willingly carried his own cross to the place of the skull. God revealed his glory when the sky grew dark and people hurled insults at Jesus as he was dying on the cross, and he felt alone, and abandoned. but still prayed “Father, forgive them.”

As we read in the First Letter of John, “*God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*” (1 John 1:9-10)

Notice, in today’s Gospel, how Mary Magdalene had *two* stories. One of this world, and the other of God’s world. The first story was “*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.*” Mary wanted the body to bury so that, in current therapeutic language, she could have ‘closure.’ That is what Peter and the other disciple were fixed upon; they were in such a hurry, and so full of their own assumptions and expectations that they didn’t even notice the angels (like the two disciples walking to Emmaus who were so downcast they did not even recognize Jesus when he was walking with them.) The first story was a story about human loss and human despair; it represents the way that we, sometimes, view the world and our place within it – as a hopeless place – because the world revolves around me and my self-interest. Mary Magdalene’s *second* story, however, is the story that has been remembered over the course of time, and it is the story that we proclaim here, in this church, today. If only Peter and the Beloved Disciple had remained with Mary Magdalene, they, too, would also have been a part of that story – for her *second* story took her beyond the confines of this world and its cheap words and into heavenly realities: “*I have seen the Lord!*” she said. Yes, the glory of God is revealed Jesus – risen from the dead.

In this conflicted and war-torn world, we get the first story all too often; a story of despair and emptiness, and with it the advice that we should simply put ourselves first. But what we celebrate today, at Easter, and on every Sunday of the year is Mary Magdalene’s second story – a story of love made visible not in spite of, but *through* the wounds of love.

Or, as Michael Ramsey once said:

*“Is there, within or beyond our suffering and frustrated universe, any purpose, way, meaning, sovereignty? We answer, yes, and the death and resurrection of Jesus betray this purpose, way, meaning, and sovereignty as living through dying, as losing self to find self, as the power of sacrificial love.”*<sup>1</sup>

May that same love bind up our own wounds and give us hope.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Christian Priest Today*, page 33