

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 1, 2022

The Third Sunday of Easter

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rt Revd Sarah Mullally, Bishop of London

on

Acts 9:1-6, (7-20); Revelations 5:11-14; John 21:1-19 (and Psalm 30)

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Sermon for 1st May 2022

It is a joy to be with you eventually after a two-year delay in which much has changed, and I bring greetings from the Diocese of London and an enthusiasm to build on our shared links as we move forward in a world shaped by a pandemic. I suspect that many of us will recall where we were when we realised that COVID was going to have a significant part of our lives. For me it came just as I was planning to fly here two years ago.

If I were to ask you to recall an incident in your life which has a particular significance, you may recall the day you fell in love, the day your child was born, your first job, passing exams, the day someone you loved died, the day you were given a diagnosis. Some of you may recall the day you became a Christian recalling a specific day and event but for many of us knowing God has been a gradual process. There are those who have received some special manifestation of Christ's presence; like Saul who years later in his letter to the Church at Corinth writes of seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus the Messiah on the road to Damascus. But for most of us our normal experience is of seeing and knowing God through some form of inner eye of faith. It is what John Wesley talks of when he speaks of being 'strangely warmed'.

And during our faith journey it would be the extra ordinary person who has not at times struggled to see God.

Throughout the gospels there are a number of incidents where followers of Christ have had difficulty in recognising who he is; the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Mary in the garden and now the fishermen in their boat uncertain who had called to them from the shore; and Saul on the road to Damascus loses his sight and spends three days in darkness.

Their difficulty in seeing Jesus had to do with sight – spiritual sight. Some kind of sight has been a common necessity for Christians down the ages in their pursuit of the knowledge of God.

Many of the gospels, and especially John, have at their heart the sense of sight - the healing of the man born blind is used to demonstrate the disciples' journey from a lack of understanding to understanding.

And those of us who can talk of a life lived long in faith are unwise to convince ourselves that there is no need to look any further because we have already found Christ and see God fully. The truth is that when we say we know God and see him fully we pigeonhole him. Saul was a devout Jew who would have had a daily knowledge of the scriptures and would have said he understood God. There on the road he saw God in a new way through the face of Christ.

Nathaniel under the fig tree, that place of learning, when we are told Jesus knew him before he was called. It is my observation that it is often when as Christians we say we know God and the truth, that we fail to understand each other and find ourselves with irresolvable differences and that is when the church struggles to reflect God in the world.

However long our faith journey is we should be open to our perspective changing in the face of God who is beyond our imagination.

Today we live in a culture that is more dependent upon the impact of the visual. It is difficult for us to witness to something we have not seen. The visual appearance of Jesus on the beach has a corporal reality about it. Subsequent to the Ascension that reality is hidden from us, and it becomes an issue of faith – God seen through the inner eye of faith. You will recall Jesus, talking to Thomas, tells him ‘Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’. The challenge we all share as we go onwards in faith is how we increase our ability to see God.

To encounter God means that we need to see. Josef Pieper (Only the lover sings: Art and Contemplation Ignatius Press 1990 page 31) suggests that our ability to see is the spiritual capacity to perceive the invisible reality as it truly is.

God has made himself known to us and he chose to do that through Jesus Christ and the risen Lord. Jesus chose to make himself known to his disciples through word, fellowship and sacrament.

The disciples returning to what was familiar to them - fishing – saw a figure on the beach but they did not know it was Jesus, until he calls out ‘throw your nets on the right side of the boat’ and after the miraculous catch Peter sees the Lord – they see him through his word.

On the beach Jesus joins the disciples beside the smell of the charcoal fire and Jesus prepares breakfast and makes himself known in fellowship and the breaking of bread for the disciples dared not ask who he was because they knew it was the Lord.

Today Jesus makes himself known to us in the same way in word, fellowship and sacrament. These moments of revelatory vision are not accidental. Richard Hooker suggests ‘Almighty God communicates by sensible means those blessings which are incomprehensible’ (in Martin Warner *Known to the Senses* Mowbray 2004 page 96)

Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue along with churches and cathedrals across the world offer places for the encounter. Through your music, preaching, celebration of the sacrament but also through the architecture, stained glass and wood, the church speaks of God.

And maybe more than at any other time, the pandemic has taught us that we need to stop and look and see. Not to look back on what was and long for it but to look into God’s face remembering who God is for us - looking forward and asking God what is the church that he is calling us to be, post pandemic. To hear what it is and to throw the nets on the other side.

To look and see requires us to take time. How often do we rush on and not abide - and therefore should we be surprised when we struggle to comprehend who God is for us and what he is calling us to be?

Ben Quash in his book *‘Abiding’* (page 65 A Continuum book 2012) talks about the importance of looking which is distinct from practical vision. He talks about the need to take time to dwell more consciously and deliberately upon something. Ben Quash (page 65) suggests it is the ability to abide. He uses the example of Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush in the book of Exodus and the fact that we are told twice that Moses looks at the bush.

'Moses looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.' Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up.' Exodus 3:2-3). Firstly, he looks, then he goes over and looks again turning aside from his intended path. Once he has turned aside God then addresses him and he hears his voice and he sees God.

If we want to encounter God, we need to turn aside from our path and look and then we have sight to see. But we should also notice that to encounter God leads to transformation. On the beach the fishermen become shepherds, on the road to Damascus the persecutor becomes the evangelist.

Though Peter denied the Lord and had failed, that did not stop Peter from being one of the pre-eminent apostles that we read about in the scriptures. In meeting Jesus crucified and risen, Peter was transformed and his perspective changed.

Saul – a devout Jew – encountered Jesus on the road and was transformed, his perspective changed, and his world was turned upside down.

To encounter God means to move from darkness to light, to find an understanding of whom we are in Christ and who he has called us to be.

To sit with the stranger, welcome the refugee, release the captive from modern day slavery, bring racial justice, to pray with the sick and to sit with the dying.

Let us take time to abide, to look and to see and let us be open to the possibility of transformation so that we too may have the faithfulness and courage of Peter and Paul to follow Christ and love his sheep.

Amen