

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, January 1, 2023**

The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ

**Solemn Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, Associate for Adult Education & Formation

*on*

Numbers 6:22-27

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## **A Reason to Live this Life**

“There are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient” (Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, p. 277).

At the beginning of a new year we question ourselves about whether we are living our life to the full, coming closer to the best version of what we could or should be. Are we on track? Are we making good use of our time? Are we growing, expanding – and why not, becoming better people? What kind of impact are we having on others – are we contributing to make the world a better place?

We can measure results in terms of prosperity, emotional fulfilment, fun, progress in our skills, knowledge, career. We might have to acknowledge that we missed opportunities, wasted time, neglected chances – there definitely is benefit in hindsight. Far from being an indictment, the humble and serene acknowledgment of our missteps and mistakes makes them worthwhile: we will have learnt something valuable – and this in itself counts as improvement!

Often, though, life has secret ways of nurturing the best in us over much longer cycles, years, sometimes a lifetime. We do not discern any progress, think nothing is happening, because some of our most significant achievements are like pearls that grow only in hiding, or seeds that disappear, have to die – and then one day, suddenly, become manifest. Only then we understand that what looked like inaction, waste of time, paralysis, in fact was a *gestation*.

A therapist once told me that this is how we should look at depression, or bereavement: as periods of gestation. On the outside nothing happens, we move in circles, are trapped, we lack motivation, are drained of energy. Something else is at work under the surface that consumes all our energies, and because we do not see any progress, or the process is much slower than we would like it to be, we mistake these life-changing inner workings for laziness, weakness, indecisiveness.

A year often is too short a time to measure these cycles which are part of everyone’s life but are not easily perceived by those around us, nor valued by our society.

Who is to decide what is the reason to live our life, this life? There is such profound wisdom, and consolation, in the sentence by Marylinne Robinson I quoted at the beginning: “There are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient”.

It came to my mind as I was reflecting on the passage from Numbers we have heard earlier as our first reading, which contains this splendid blessing:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

When Marylinne Robinson, in her novel *Gilead*, points to the one reason sufficient to live this life, to make sense of it, to give it meaning and fulfilment, she is talking about a blessing uttered by the old pastor who is the main character of the book, John Ames. He imparts this blessing using these very words – it is an intensely moving passage. Despite being a profoundly good-natured, humble and forgiving person, he has battled with grudge and resentment for the whole of his life, especially towards his best friend’s son, Jack Boughton – partly for understandable reasons. This is profoundly humiliating and painful for such a conscientious and loving minister – and it casts a shadow over everything else, over the whole of his life. Until that is, unexpectedly, he realises that this life-long struggle had been a gestation of the kind I described earlier, and a preparation for the scene that comes almost at the end of the novel, when the old pastor says goodbye to the young man:

We sat there for a while. Then I [it is the old pastor speaking] said, “The thing I would like, actually, is to bless you.” He [the young man] shrugged. “What would that involve?” “Well, as I envisage it, it would involve my placing my hand on your brow and asking the protection of God for you. But if it would be embarrassing—” There were a few people on the street. “No, no,” he said. “That doesn’t matter.” And he took his hat off and set it on his knee and closed his eyes and lowered his head, almost rested it against my hand, and I did bless him to the limit of my powers, whatever they are, repeating the benediction from Numbers, of course—“The Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” Nothing could be more beautiful than that, or more expressive of my feelings, certainly, or more sufficient, for that matter. Then, when he didn’t open his eyes or lift up his head, I said, “Lord, bless [John Ames] Jack Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father.” Then he sat back and looked at me as if he were waking out of a dream.

“Thank you, Reverend,” he said, [...] I told him it was an honor to bless him. And that was also absolutely true. In fact I’d have gone through seminary and ordination and all the years intervening for that one moment. He just studied me, in that way he has. Then the bus came. I said, “We all love you, you know,” and he laughed and said, “You’re all saints.” He stopped in the door and lifted his hat, and then he was gone, God bless him. (p. 275f)

A blessing is meant to benefit the person on whom it is pronounced – and yet here it benefits the person imparting it. As he blesses the young man, it is the old pastor’s life that reaches plenitude.

Blessing has a peculiar feature: we cannot impart it on ourselves, we cannot say: I bless myself. We always need someone else to bless us, to call grace, peace, growth, life, joy upon us. This does not mean however that it does not benefit the person imparting it.

Have you ever noticed how restoring, comforting, fulfilling it is to wish good to someone else, to bless other people? We keep doing it especially in this time of the year, to the people we know,

those we bump into, those we love. Wishing good to others brings real, deep, lasting benefit to ourselves – for a simple reason: to wish good things to others we have to summon them in ourselves first.

It can be hard sometimes to wish peace to others when our hearts are full of anxiety and in turmoil. Or wish life to others when we feel dead inside. Or joy to others when we are grappling with persistent inner sadness. And yet if we manage to do it, it is because we still have access to some at least of that peace, that life, that joy in us – and these are the kind of things that are not depleted when we bestow them on others – on the contrary: the more we wish them to others, the more they grow in ourselves.

This happens when we bless other people, but even more so when we bless our God, which is at the heart of each of our times of worship – it is what we are doing now.

So, let us cherish this thought at the beginning of this new year, as we bless each other, as we bless God: yes, “there are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient”.

Each single blessing given and received is a sufficient reason to live this life.