

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 19, 2023

The Last Sunday After the Epiphany (Quinquagesma)

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz, *Associate for Pastoral Care*

on

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

+

Invitation to the Adventure

Many of you already know this, but for those of you who don't know it,
Or for those of you who've somehow avoided admitting it to yourselves...
...it's time to get excited because:
Wednesday is Ash Wednesday.
Lent. Starts. Wednesday.
And yes, I did say: it's time to get excited,
Because it's actually a very exciting time.
We often have this image of Lent as a dour, sour sad season,
But what it actually is, is forty days of invitation to go on an adventure of holiness,
A season of self-conscious invitation to grow in faith, in hope, in love
To engage more deliberately, more intentionally, in the practice of the faith
All with an eye towards the gracious death-undoing glory of the cross of Christ,
The brightness of that glory being none other
Than the Uncreated Resurrection light of God's fierce Undying love.
It is to that Light that this day, this Quinquagesima Sunday,
This last Sunday before Lent, is dedicated
As a reminder of the glory to come, the glory God desires to reveal in us.
We heard about that glory this morning at Mass in the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus
When a group of disciples were witness to the light of God shining from Jesus' human face and body,
And we received that Light together in the Sacrament,
The light that is the life of humanity becoming sacramental food and drink, our nurture, our source.
This evening, our teacher St Paul tells us that this light yearns to pierce the shadows of sin and death
With which our hearts have been too-long veiled
It's important to remember that, throughout scripture, the heart is not understood
As the wellspring of emotions,
Pleasant or otherwise (all that's usually associated with our guts)
The heart is the central core of our being:
The seat of our thinking, perceiving, understanding, remembering
And the source of our willing and acting.
The light of Love's pure glory longs to shine in us, through us, from us
That we may see the world, ourselves, each other, bathed in its brilliance,
That all we think and know and will and do
Might be done in, with, and through its light.
Without it, all we think, know, will and do

Is done in darkness.

Lent is a season-long self-conscious invitation from our loving Lord Jesus Christ,
Through his Body, the Church,
To let the light shine in darkness, to let love blaze from the depths of our hearts
To become living flames of God's own love.
And yes. That is. Exciting.

It's when we forget all that that we can get into a little trouble.

And, sadly, it can be easy to forget.

In our therapeutically oriented, self-help crazed, obsessively self-actualizing world
In which the virtues of religion are impossible to comprehend
Unless they're reduced to little more than an extended program of
Self-improvement or stress management or productivity enhancement tools,
In such a world,

It's easy for us to assume that the disciplines that we practice in Lent
Ought to make us better, improved, well-managed, fitter, happier, more productive,
Perhaps even more compassionate and generally useful people
Otherwise: why do them? Why fast? Why abstain? Why give alms?
Why engage in a focused discipline of prayer?

And why even bother with such outmoded things when we can invest our time in Lent
In so many other obviously productive ways, achieving so many of our personal betterment goals?
But here's the counter-intuitive thing:

The disciplines we practice in Lent are not meant to make us better people.

The disciplines we practice in Lent are ways by which we welcome grace into our lives.

The disciplines we practice in Lent are ways by which we polish the mirror of our hearts

To better reflect the light of Christ to the world,

And reflect the world and its needs back to Christ in love.

There are a lot of folks in this world who will happily help us self-actualize from now to doomsday

But if we want to be by grace what God is by nature

If we want to be filled with, shine with, the Rays of God's own Uncreated Light

Whatever self we think we have we will abandon, in faith, to God

Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me, says our Lord

If you want to find yourself, you'll lose yourself

And if you lose yourself in God's love, by God's grace

You will discover yourself in Christ as a site of God's love blazing out into the world

And you will do, by grace, all those good works that God has prepared for you to walk in.

The upshot of all of that may be that when folks look at you, they may say you're a better person

Or they may want to stone you for daring to love the people they hate,

For doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God

Who knows

But you won't have done it to be better by any standard the world can understand

You'll have done it because you want to fall more in love with Jesus Christ

Who has loved you ere the Word serenely spoken splintered the primordial darkness

With the splendor of the first light shining at the dawn of creation.

Following the Way of the Cross is not about self-improvement,

But self-emptying, self-sacrificing love.

Our Lord is not interested in helping us become our best selves,

He's interested in his life being our life

He's interested in our hearts being filled to overflowing, flooded with the fire of his love.

In verse 7 of Second Corinthians, our friend Saint Paul tells us that we have this treasure of glory
In earthen vessels,

“Vessels of clay, so that the power’s excellence might be God’s and not come from us.”
Our practices in Lent are meant to humble us, to remind us of our fragility, our need for God,
To empty us of ourselves, of the world,
To help us understand those things for which we truly hunger:
Love, justice, peace, joy: the abiding presence of God,
To put all that we are, all that we have, and all that we love at God’s disposal, in God’s hands
To put our hearts in God’s hands
So that God can fill us with God’s grace, with the light of God’s glory.

Whatever your discipline may be this Lent,
Let it be a graceful means by which you make yourself more available to grace,
Let it be a means by which you open yourself to be undone by love
Let it be a yes to God’s desire to draw away from your heart the veil of sin and death
That shrouds and shadows you, and that you on your own cannot shift,
No matter how much “better” you may be or become,
So that at last you, your life, your love
May shine with the Glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ.
Beloved: you are invited to the adventure.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.