

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, February 5, 2023**

The Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany (Septuagesima)

**Choral Mattins and Festal Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rector

*on*

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Matthew 5:13-20

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## **Salt and Light**

*Let's drink to the hard working people  
Let's drink to the lonely of birth  
Raise your glass to the good and the evil  
Let's drink to the salt of the earth.*<sup>1</sup>

Words from the song 'Salt of the Earth' by the Rolling Stones and released when I was eight years old in 1968. It's a song about working class people and the words resonated with my experience of growing up in a working-class part of East Hull in Yorkshire.

*"You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world."*

What is Jesus telling us today as we listen to our Gospel reading? Even Yorkshiremen know he wasn't really talking just about them!

In last week's gospel, we heard the beginning of 'The Sermon on the Mount,' which we will work through over the next few weeks until Lent. The nine Beatitudes set the scene for Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God, in which he describes a state of life that is counter-cultural. As it was then, so it is today – for most people it is *not* blessed to be poor, or to mourn, or to be hungry and thirsty for anything! Our children are encouraged not to be meek but to put themselves first; peacemakers are ignored; mercy is considered a weakness; and purity a stumbling block to doing whatever you like on social media. The Beatitudes certainly seem to describe a new way of looking at the world. As Mother Lee-Pae said last week *"The church is a gathering of beautiful people who can lay down their authority and possessions for the benefit of others and put themselves in a low and humble position to bless others."*

But it is the last Beatitude that is the most alarming. The first eight are addressed to *others* (blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek, and so on) but the last Beatitude is very personal. *"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."* Following Jesus comes at a price; standing up for him may very well bring revulsion, persecution, and people will even make up stories and lie about you.

Now we can see why the disciples (and us) are called to be salt of the earth and light to the world. Our Christian faith cannot be hidden; is not a personal thing. Going to church is not private religion because it is meant to make a difference after church! The words of Jesus are not just to give us comfort, they are also

disturbing, and counter-cultural, and challenging. “You are the salt of the earth – you are the light of the world!” Jesus sends us out into the world to make a difference.

Speaking on the Beatitudes, Rowan Williams once said, *“The bottom line is the visibility of the Kingdom, - the visibility of Christ in our lives. The Kingdom is where Christ is visible, I suggest that the Church is visible where Christ is visible. In that case we can talk about salt and light because they give shape and sense and savor to human life.”*<sup>2</sup>

So often, though, we hear the teaching of Jesus, but struggle to put it into practice when we leave church. As one of my old parishioners in East London used to say, *“Father, I don’t understand it; why do people go to church looking like they are going to the dentist? And then come back from church looking like they have been to the dentist!”*

Listen to the refrain of that That Rolling Stones song I mentioned earlier:

*And when I search a faceless crowd  
A swirling mass of gray and black and white  
They don't look real to me  
In fact, they look so strange.*

Are we going to be that faceless crowd as we leave this place? Disconnected from reality?

Some of you will know New York born artist Norman Rockwell’s painting *‘Lift up thine eyes’* – a playful illustration of Saint Thomas Church that shows crowds of people rushing by the glorious Fifth Avenue Façade of the church in 1957, not noticing what they are missing. Meanwhile, the Rector looks down from the main doors as the Verger, perched precariously on a step ladder is putting up a sign saying ‘lift up thine eyes.’ (We have a print on the Fifth floor of the Parish House if you want to see it).

This disconnect between faith and action is not new. We heard about it in our first lesson from Isaiah: God challenged his people about their double-standards:

*Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,  
and oppress all your workers.  
Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight  
and to strike with a wicked fist.*

So what does God want?

*...to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke.  
To share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin.  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...*

Does this sound familiar? ‘You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world.’

February is Black history month and, as an immigrant to the United States, I have been reflecting on stories in relations to the Beatitudes of the Kingdom, and Jesus’ encouragement to his disciples to be salt of the earth and light to the world. Earlier, I mentioned Norman Rockwell, who has been described as the great American storyteller, and his depictions of American culture are loved throughout the country. However, I was not prepared for one of his most challenging and powerful paintings, which is of a six-year girl; Ruby

Bridges' first day at school in 1960. I guess that most of you know the story, but for those here who do not, and for many on the livestream overseas, Ruby was the first African American child to attend William Franz Elementary School in New Orleans, following a court order to end segregation in New Orleans schools. To enforce the end of segregation, and to ensure her safety, Ruby had to be escorted by deputy Marshalls to protect her from a crowd outside the school.

Rockwell's painting depicts this little six-year-old's walk to school, dutifully following the Marshalls who wear yellow armbands. Rockwell has painted the canvas from the perspective of the little girl, so you cannot see above the Marshall's shoulders, and he has painted them as if they were marching. Ruby, wearing a pretty white dress and pigtails, carries her school books and a ruler. She seems so small compared to the Marshalls, but she is striding calmly and confidently towards her school. As you look at the painting, reminiscent of some of the dramatic black and white photographs of that time, one's eyes are suddenly drawn to the wall that they are passing, and to the presence of foul graffiti – the N-word and the letters KKK, and the remains of a large tomato splattered on the wall thrown, presumably, at the little girl.

Rockwell titled his painting *The problem we all live with*, which not only reminds me of our collective responsibility to deal with prejudice or injustice, but also the words of Jesus who demands that we be salt of the earth and light to the world, and the consequences that come when we put into practice his teaching and live by the Beatitudes. Regardless of political allegiance, living by the Beatitudes will provoke criticism, and even revulsion.

Jesus said, *"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

But what if I don't want to? What if I am afraid to? Jesus also said, *"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything..."* Which is also pretty challenging. Whichever way you look at it, Jesus' understanding of building a Kingdom on the Beatitudes is hard. Do I really want to be good for nothing for Jesus?

How is Jesus calling you, today, to be salt of the earth and, light to the world?

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<sup>1.</sup> Song, 'Salt of the Earth,' from the Album *Beggars Banquet* (1968) by the Rolling Stones

<sup>2.</sup> Rowan Williams at a bible study given in Wales in 2000 on the Beatitudes.