

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 26, 2023

The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Solemn Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Zachary Thompson, *Vicar of St. James' Madison Avenue*

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Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

In the name of the true and living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Let me begin simply by saying thank you to Father Turner for this wonderful invitation to join you and passion tide for this fifth Sunday in Lent as we move toward Holy Week.

It is a great joy for me to be here with you at Saint Thomas, just up the road at Saint James. When I get a rare Sunday off, you find me in your pews regularly. And lucky to count Father Turner and this wonderful team of clergy as friends and ministers of the Gospel pointing to the Great Kingdom. And this parish I treasure, because as the great 20th century theologian Austin Ferrer said, you know, Anglicanism at its best. And I think St Thomas holds on to that which Anglicanism has at its best, like this glorious evensong, this wonderful choir, the boys, incredible job, all of it pointing us to Jesus Christ.

All of the sacraments and structure and system and glory of Anglicanism like a telescope pointing us to Jesus Christ. So I give thanks to God for your witness in this place. You know, a Sunday sermon series on the Beatitudes in this season of Lent is a good idea.

Father, I will be happy I say this right. It's a good idea. As we observe this time set apart in the life of the church for prayer, self-examination and repentance. It seems fitting to look to the Beatitudes as a kind of North Star.

I think the rector and I and perhaps other of the clergy share Michael Ramsey as a theological hero, that great 20th century Archbishop of Canterbury. And he helpfully reminds us that our self-examination is never meant to end with a kind of navel gazing and preoccupation with ourselves.

That's just a form of narcissism cloaked in spiritual language. Let's hear from the good archbishop himself. We do this best self-examination that is not by looking at ourselves in an introspective way. But by looking at our Lord Jesus Christ with a glance at ourselves beside Him.

If we think first of his love and goodness to us, there will quickly come to us a realization of our ingratitude, pride and selfishness. This season, not unlike the rest of our Christian life, is about looking to Jesus. The pioneer and perfecter of our faith in asking for his grace and his mercy, to have our stony hearts turned into the likeness of His sacred heart. The Beatitudes sketch for us, the kind of people we might become as we stay close to our Savior and learn from Him as his disciples.

This evening, the Beatitude before us is this Blessed are the merciful. For they will receive mercy. And because the Beatitudes serve as guideposts on the way to making us Christlike. We can say that to become a person of the Beatitudes.

Is to become like God. Or as Saint Peter puts it in his epistle, we become participants in the divine nature. As we practice the Beatitudes, we share in God's life. So where do we learn that God is merciful?

We turn first, of course, to sacred scripture. Take Psalm 103. He forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities. He redeems your life from the grave and crowns you with mercy and loving kindness. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Slow to anger and of great kindness. As a father cares for his children, so does the Lord care for those who fear him. For He knows himself whereof we are made. He remembers that we are but dust. Our days are like the grass.

We flourish like a flower of the field. But the merciful goodness of the Lord endures forever. And as we see in our Old Testament reading tonight, God reveals himself to Moses on Mount Sinai. In this way, the Lord the Lord, a God, merciful and gracious.

Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. Keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation. Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. The Blind Men in our gospel reading tonight, sensing that God is in their midst in the person of Jesus.

They rightly cry out for mercy because they know God as the all merciful one and the incarnate Word of God. All merciful and compassionate reaches out His saving hands. Bringing sight to the blind and new life. To those who sit in darkness.

God is merciful and compassionate. See the Scriptures. And blessed are those who are becoming like God, who are being changed into the likeness of Jesus. Blessed are the merciful. What would it look like for us to live this beatitude?

To become a person of this particular beatitude? Let's recall this story of a New York City police officer named Steve McDonald. We might not think to go to the New York Police Department first for a story of mercy.

But we worship a God of surprises and amazing grace. In 1986, Stephen was a 29 year old third generation New York Police Department officer. Soon to be a father when he and his partner were called to check in on a group of boys near the boathouse in Central Park.

And after beginning a conversation, one of the boys, a 15 year old named, shivered. He shot Officer McDonald three times. Stephen lived for the next 31 years, paralyzed from the neck down. And just six months after the shooting with Steven still in hospital, his son was baptized by his parish priest in the chapel of the Bellevue Hospital. At his boys baptism. Steven's wife read his statement aloud, intended for Shabbat and for his family. I forgive him. He said. And I hope that he can find peace. And purpose in his life. The following summer, Stephens sent stamps and a box of stationery to shivered along with a note saying Let's carry on a dialog. He later met with Shahzad's mother. And I love this part of the story. He attended services at a Baptist church in Harlem with Chauvin's grandmother. Officer McDonald was able to speak, albeit haltingly, and breathes with the help of a respirator.

And he made many public appearances over those 31 years, telling of his faith as a Christian, as a Roman Catholic in his case, and saying that if people wanted forgiveness, they had to show it to others. Blessed are the merciful.

Michael Ramsey is again helpful. We must first be ready to forgive all others. God's past. Forgiveness of us is the great incentive to our forgiveness of others. For his undeserved love toward ourselves cuts the ground beneath any claim.

We have to be harsh or unforgiving about others. God's forgiveness is called absolution. Because it is a setting free. Steven was set free by the mercy of Jesus Christ. And as he stayed close to him as his savior and lived as his disciple, he became a person of the Beatitudes.

With God's help. So can we. Placing ourselves under the banner of Christ's outstretched love. Our stony hearts can become hearts of flesh. Friends. The journey we take, this passion tide comes with the promise of new life comes with the promise of a new spirit within us.

Comes with a promise of redemption. Even life from the grave. May the crucified and living Christ crown us with his mercy. And loving kindness. So that we might become a people. Of the Beatitudes. Blessed are the merciful. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.