

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, July 9, 2023**

The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministries and School Chaplain*

on

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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## **‘O Lamb of God, I come, I come’**

In my household we all remember the doll, affectionately known as Dental Doll, DD, a bright colorful rag doll with a fixed sewn on grin, that would accompany my older daughter to many a medical appointment. DD was such an essential source of comfort, that whenever she was upset, DD would also be alongside her under her unfailingly huge pile of layers or blankets on her bed. A pile that would have weighed heavily too me, for her was source of physical comfort.

We all have our habits and sources of comfort, our very own ‘comfort blankets’, those temporary, material things that make a difference in the moment, that enable us to ‘keep calm and carry on’. We often carry things that symbolize reassurance, and comfort, crosses in pockets, photos in wallets, physical remembrances and words that carry no meaning to another yet act as a comforter, a reminder we are loved.

Today we are offered a different source of comfort in the words of Jesus, lasting words that speak to the soul. Comfortable Words sometimes read from the 1928 Prayer book and shared in our Communion Anthem today. Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. *Matthew 11:28*

Such words of comfort that are echoed throughout scripture, seek to encourage, strengthen and build up in a way that brings respite, hope in adversity and gives peace, cause to pause, refreshment, rest.

At first glance the tender tone of today’s particular verses of comfort appear to sit in stark contrast to the radical challenge to the words we have heard from Matthew’s gospel in recent weeks, of the need leaving parents and siblings, of who and how we must welcome others, and the consequences of turning our back on God. However, these words together with today’s comforting gospel form part of the good news as a whole, and direct us to a life which embraces God’s law, as a law of love.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus encounters an agitated crowd. Not only are they critical of John the Baptist as one being possessed by a demon, they are disgruntled with Jesus for eating and drinking with the wrong people, far too often. In response having prayed to God, in thanks for having hidden his purposes from the wise and wonderful of his age Jesus shares his deep-rooted compassionate invitation for humanity, Come to me, those who are weary, sad, down trodden, oppressed by evils of society, and to borrow the phrase from the late Trevor Huddleston, Archbishop of the Church of the Province of the Indian Ocean, have *Naught for Your Comfort*.

Words which are spoken to the Pharisees whose own lives are weighed down and burdened by the letter rather than the spirit of the law. A law which made the love of God distant and forbearing, inaccessible, rather than one that brought them close to the heart of a father who offered them rest, for the soul. In using the metaphorical image of a yoke, an agricultural symbol of servitude and onerous labor for a beast of burden Jesus offers a promise, that the commitment to the labor of the kingdom, the true law of discipleship laid over their shoulders is easy, by which he means well fitted, comfortable. Just as a yoke would be personally made to measure for an animal, his yoke is not to be a lifelong burden, but one that is made to measure, that fits. It too acts as guide a means of connection for those who accept his invitation to follow the way of law as a way of love, wherever, whenever, whoever we are, 'Come unto me with the burdens on your heart'.

The things that weigh us down, that we feel and keep us awake, our sins, ambitions and habits, the overbearing pressures, expectation of our community's and society at large. The things that burden our souls, that play on our mind, the self-inflicted fears of missing out and inadequacy, that obstruct our belief in his promise, his capacity for forgiveness, healing and grace that even when we cast our burdens and our sins upon him, simply pick them up again.

Here is the good news, Jesus offers us an unconditional invitation irrespective of our looks, or rules of life, or society or intelligence, how many times we go to mass. Rather Jesus is inviting us to something completely different for he accepts us precisely where and what and how we are, with no exceptions, and calls us to see us as he sees us in our fragility, our brokenness, as his beloved. Our right to a relationship with God is not subject to our own sense of worth or goodness, it is about God's goodness and love and acceptance of us. And there's more, while Jesus meets us all where we are and accepts us for who we are, he does not let us stay that way. To encounter Jesus is to be transformed even in the midst of our difficult, uncomfortable times, our dark nights of the soul, when we are hurting, are drained and it's hard to love or understand God's will or way. To change, to be transformed, is not to start with what we are lacking or a burden, but with love and acceptance. This is why Jesus describes discipleship with him as easy and light. Once we understand we are beloved, we can make the radical turn to do the same: loving others without condition, welcoming others as Jesus would.

In 1835 Charlotte Elliott, author of the words of today's Gradual hymn, had convinced herself that her disabilities left her nothing to offer God and her distressing thoughts of her apparent uselessness caused her to question the reality of her whole spiritual life. The story goes that Elliott was struck by the words of a minister who asked whether she had truly given her heart to Christ. She went on to share wanted to serve God but didn't know how. He replied, "Just come to him as you are". The rest you might say is history as she penned "**Just as I Am**" this famous [hymn](#), the final verse being taken from her *Hours of Sorrow Cheered and Comforted* (1836).

The familiar words of witness and acceptance, of Jesus' invitation to come to me, has been sung ever since in stadium filled crusades, and in the quietness of a deathbed scene. It's a hymn offering us a response that says yes to God's invitation to a way of love, yes I am loved, yes I will love. It embraces an openness to renewal and conversion, and so today as we continue in our worship and are invited to communion, may we behold the lamb of God, and proclaim afresh in our hearts,  
'O Lamb of God, I come, I come'.