

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 15, 2023

Patronal Feast Day

Procession and Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD Rector Emeritus

on

John 20:24-29; John 11:16; John 14:5; John 21:1-14; John 20:29

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Saint Thomas Bicentennial October 15, 2023

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

I cannot begin without first thanking our Rector Father Turner and the Saint Thomas Wardens and Vestry for their invitation to preach on this auspicious occasion. Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry was first invited a good while ago but, having accepted, then this past summer had to withdraw from this and other occasions for reasons of health restrictions on his travel. It is a privilege to be Bishop Curry's second.

So here we are, observing two centuries of Saint Thomas Church's witness and service to this great city and the world beyond. Let's begin with our Patron Saint. Sometimes, because of his being called Doubting Thomas, he is diminished or even set at naught. But before we get to Thomas's so-called doubts, let's look at who he was and what is revealed in the Gospel about him. There we shall see qualities that can also be perceived in the history of this beloved church dedicated to him, qualities to be cherished not only in the past but now and forward into the future.

Thomas is listed in all four Gospels as one of Jesus's chosen Twelve Apostles, but it is in Saint John's Gospel that his significance is revealed. Saint John's description of Thomas reminds me a little of the character Puddleglum in C.S. Lewis's children's series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Puddleglum was both pessimistic and loyal, and in fact at one critical moment his words summoned up courage in his friends and turned the tide of a desperate battle. He said, "Well, the cause is probably lost, but we might as well make a good end of it."ⁱ And a good end was just what came of it. Just so, when Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem with all the dangers awaiting him there, it was Thomas who said to his dismayed fellow-disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."ⁱⁱ Beneath these words lay a simple and deep love for the Lord in Thomas's heart.

Speaking of simplicity and depth, Thomas also had a way of putting the question that would be on everyone's mind, yet no one else asked. At the Last Supper, in the Upper Room, the air thick with fearful apprehension while the Lord spoke about his destiny, Jesus then said, "You know the way where I am going." It was Thomas who interrupted Jesus, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" To which Jesus famously replied, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me."ⁱⁱⁱ

After Christ's crucifixion and burial on Good Friday and the discovery of his empty tomb early Easter Sunday morning, the same Upper Room was the scene of Jesus's answer to Thomas's hesitation to believe his fellow apostles' word – that Jesus was raised from the dead, that Jesus was brilliantly alive. Thomas had been absent on Easter Sunday evening, when Jesus revealed himself to the remaining ten apostles, and he said that unless he saw for himself and could put his hands in the risen Lord's wounds, he would not believe. And he didn't

want to hear about disembodied spirits or angels or good causes surviving the death of a founder. So it was that eight days later, in the same Upper Room, its doors again locked, Jesus came to them and offered himself to Thomas's examination. The Gospel doesn't say if Thomas took the Lord up on the offer to touch his wounds. What it records is Thomas's exclamation, "My Lord and my God!"^{iv} This is the highest profession of faith in the entire New Testament.

Later, Thomas was among seven disciples to see the risen Lord when he appeared by the Sea of Tiberias (Galilee) while they were fishing.^v This is where John's Gospel record, and the biblical mention of Thomas, ends. However, there are ancient traditions that say Thomas carried the Gospel of Jesus to Persia and even to India.

Let's review Thomas's qualities: 1) Deep love for Jesus and loyalty to him, not least in the face of adversity. 2) Plain-speaking concerning the questions of faith in Christ. 3) Confession of the highest sort to the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord, crucified and risen and reigning, "My Lord and my God!"

Just above the high altar, carved in the reredos, is the risen Christ showing his wounds to Thomas who is kneeling and gesturing towards Christ in that moment as he exclaims "My Lord and my God." "Have you believed because you have seen me?" replies Jesus. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."^{vi} An old communion devotion uses Thomas's words. Some parishioners of Saint Thomas say them softly at the altar rail as they receive the Sacrament in their hands. "My Lord and my God!"

The history of Saint Thomas Church reveals Thomas-qualities. Rather than mention the particular names of Rectors, and in due course Directors of Music and Heads of the Choir School – lest we overlook someone – let us realize that they each had around them leaders and members of the Saint Thomas family to join in facing adversity and accomplishing what was achieved. They faced it and did it together. In the nineteenth century there was indebtedness and fire and a rebuilt church and a Civil War – when the area of early Saint Thomas at Broadway and Houston was afflicted by draft riots and by federal troops sent into the city by President Lincoln. Then after the war the move north to this spot. The great new church on this site then burned to the ground in a catastrophic fire at the start of the last century. And as the residential neighborhood was replaced by business and financial structures, Saint Thomas resisted the calls to move further uptown, choosing instead to rebuild a yet more glorious temple of Jesus Christ, an inspiring witness amidst so many other temples dedicated to making money: this breath-taking church. At the end of the First World War they founded the Choir School, now a century old and a jewel of the church's ministry. Our first capital campaign to endow this beautiful church was launched just as the Great Depression of the 1930s began, and then a Second World War. You can read the details of all this in Professor Wright's fine history of Saint Thomas written 25 years ago. Not the least fascinating chapter is the story of Saint Thomas's revival and growth in liturgical and choral excellence, in attendance and in service and generosity from 1970 onward, during what has been a period of general church decline in society, social headwinds that continue to this day. Then there was 9/11, and the so called 2008 Great Recession (which was when we began our second capital campaign – can you believe it?) And then, or should I say still, the Covid 19 pandemic with its devastating effects on church attendance everywhere; yet at the same time inspiring at Saint Thomas an online outreach around the country and the world unimagined only a few years ago.

So here we are, and what do we have? Start with this glorious church building and all that has gone into it. What a mission station on this incredible street corner! Then, the liturgy and music and teaching which are called to live up to the building, with its gothic splendor pointing to the heavens. Outside on Fifth Avenue over the doors it proclaims, in the words of the ancient *Te Deum*, "Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ!" And, of course inside above the altar, Saint Thomas, pointing to the glorious wounds of the risen Christ, "My Lord and my God!" It remains our mission to invite and to draw people into that life-giving mystery.

Loyalty and courage in the face of adversity and challenge, even disaster. Plain and truthful speech about Jesus, his Gospel, and the apostolic faith. And then at last eyes to see the risen glory of Christ crucified.

These are the qualities of our Patron Saint, and they are embedded in this wonderful church named after him, Saint Thomas Church and Choir School. Dearly beloved, Father Rector, Wardens and Vestry, Maestro and Headmaster, bishops and clergy and parishioners and friends: by God's grace may Saint Thomas persevere and hand on this priceless heritage proclaiming Jesus Christ our Lord and God! In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

ⁱ C.S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Collier Books, 1976), 54-66.

ⁱⁱ John 11:16

ⁱⁱⁱ John 14:5ff

^{iv} John 20:19-29

^v John 21:1-14

^{vi} John 20:29