

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 8, 2023

The Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

+

A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

+

The Consequences of discovering the Gate of Heaven

“The mission of Saint Thomas Church is to make present the great drama of the redemption of Christ which is at the center of all liturgy in such a way that it draws the congregation in as active participants – that they are invited to become part of it through hearing the word, taking part in the sacraments drawing people up to the altar rail to receive the Body and Blood of Christ: taste and see – bread and wine.” The opening words by the Rector Emeritus, Fr. Andy Mead, in an award-winning short film about the life of Saint Thomas Church titled *“Gate of Heaven.”*

Fr. Mead expresses a great truth, that the purpose of the liturgy is to engage the worshipper in the what he calls the great drama of redemption. Here we are, round the corner from Broadway and on the greatest shopping street in the world, and yet what we do is not a show, not a spectacle, and far more valuable than any of what you can glimpse in the windows of Tiffany or Bergdorf Goodman or Cartier. Our liturgy may be done in a grand setting - extravagantly and sumptuously - yet, at the heart of our life, is the astonishing fact of a God who emptied himself into creation and all for the sake of those who had become estranged from him. The Creator of the Universe yearning to draw back to himself those whom he had created, but who had forgotten the Father’s love. As the prayer for mission in our Book of Common Prayer puts it so beautifully, *“Lord Jesus Christ, who didst stretch out thine arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of thy saving embrace...”*

There are some, of course, for who the liturgy *is* spectacle because it offers something different to the ordinariness and drudgery of their daily lives. For others, the liturgy is a kind of comfort blanket, cocooning them from the horrors of the world they see and hear on their television screens. But the liturgy is intended to draw us into active participation in the mystery of redemption and that means there are consequences. If we truly believe that, in the Eucharist, the bread and wine are not mere tokens or symbols of a meal in the past, but the real presence of Jesus Christ resurrected, ascended, and glorified then everything changes and is charged with God’s love.

As we heard in our Epistle reading today, *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”* ‘Becoming like him in his death’ – we are invited to enter into the mystery of Christ’s love and to recognize the difference that love has made to you and to me and, therefore, to our community.

And that is why the prayer for mission I just quoted is not only a reflection on the self-emptying of God in Jesus on the cross, for it continues, *“So clothe us in thy Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know thee to the knowledge and love of thee; for the honor of thy Name.”*

Oh yes, active participation means there are consequences. This is not private religion. And for those who struggle with any kind of change in the liturgical life of the church, please remember that there never have been, and never will be, a liturgical police-force to ensure that everything stays the same as it always was. It cannot, because Jesus Christ is in our midst, risen, ascended, and glorified, and we are now to be his followers in a broken world; our hearts burning within us as he talks to us on the road – that is, as we approach him in Holy Communion – our own little Emmaus walk.

So here we are, poised on a great milestone; on Thursday we celebrate 200 years since the first worship service of Saint Thomas Church. And what humble beginnings! No French-Gothic shrine; no church of medieval cathedral proportions; no jeweled Book of the Gospels or silver-gilt chalices; just the word and the sacraments in a rented room on Broome Street and Broadway – a part of town that soon became the red-light district and frequented by drunks. The first Saint Thomas Church was exactly that – *a church* which, as you know from your baptism and confirmation classes, is not the building but *the people*. Have you ever thought that the origins of our beloved parish echo the way the early church gathered and worshipped? Until the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, our forebears in the faith – including so many great saints and martyrs - worshipped not in shrines but in living and dining rooms; not in glorious stone buildings but in dark catacombs and cemeteries. As we celebrate our Bicentennial, we do well to think about those humble beginnings and the vision of those who risked so much to create our parish, and the fact that there were only 23 parishioners when the Church was incorporated into the city of New York. After all, the origins of the phrase ‘Gate of Heaven’ come from Jacob’s meeting with God *in the desert and on his own!*

Our mission statement emphasizes the need to engage with the story of redemption but for that engagement to stay here but to make a difference to others. We are called to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ. That’s one sentence my friends, and you cannot worship truly unless you let go of all that holds you back and prevents you from loving. Yes, to truly worship is to love, and to love Jesus is to learn to love myself and in loving myself, to learn to serve him by loving others.

When we do this, we may be ridiculed. Certainly, it can be uncomfortable. Our Gospel story is a shocking reminder that those who do good and are faithful, who simply do their duty, may be vilified, beaten, or even killed for doing the Lord’s work. Jesus knew that, and formed his own disciples and followers to be open to the promptings of the spirit, and engaged with the world.

I have to say, I am pretty fed-up hearing from the leaders of our church, and other churches how much the Episcopal Church has declined over the past 25 years, and all those many reasons for that decline! I am not interested in reasons for decline, but growth in a depth and a quality of life. Even if Saint Thomas were to become the last active parish in our Diocese, we would still be essential to the life of New York, but only, my friends, if we live by our mission statement and put worshipping, loving, and serving Jesus at the heart of all that we do. We may not face the persecution of the early Christians but we need to ensure that we do not become an irrelevance in this City of New York. As Norman Rockwell so deliciously portrayed in that wonderful painting “Lift up thine eyes,” thousands will pass the doors of our church on Fifth Avenue and fail to see this gate of heaven.

So, that brings me back to our church as an oasis of prayer in midtown Manhattan. Let me end with some beautiful words of Archbishop Michael Ramsey on why being a gateway to heaven is so important for us at Saint Thomas Church:

*‘How may we think of heaven? Let us recall some words of St Augustine: **‘We shall rest and we shall see, we shall see and we shall love, we shall love and we shall praise, in the end that is no end’** (City of God XXII.30). Resting, seeing, loving, and praising; these words describe not only the goal of heaven but also the message of Christianity in the world. For the world has lost the way of resting, seeing, loving, praising. Swept along in ceaseless activity, the world does not pause to consider. With no resting and no considering, the power to see is lost: to see where we are going, to see the larger*

*perspectives, to see beyond the group, nation, or race, to see human beings as they really are with the image of God within them. Where seeing is dim, love becomes faint; and praise is lost, for we praise only when first we have seen and loved. Human beings lose the praise of their Creator, which is the goal of their existence and the source of their resting, seeing and loving.”*¹.

My friends, as we celebrate 200 years this week – let us praise the Creator – the goal of our existence, and the source of our resting, seeing and loving.

1. ‘Be Still and Know.’ p.123