

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday March 10 2024

The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare)

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Sam Wells
on
John 3:14-21
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God Bless America

The words of John 3:16, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only son...' are for many raised in conservative Christian circles, the most familiar in the Bible, because they sum up the conviction that Jesus came to bring salvation and we can find eternal life by believing in him. We often emphasise the words loved and Son, but for John the key word may well have been 'world,' because it was a new idea that God loved not just Israel but the whole world.

Like many well-known phrases, this verse has been adapted and altered over time. It's hard to deny that the confidence of these words was transposed into a famous song written in 1918. It was written by the Belarussian Jew Irving Berlin, who was then 29 having come to the US at the age of five, and was called 'God bless America.' Berlin shares the conviction that America is a country uniquely blessed and loved by God, and that people from across the world can find a kind of earthly salvation by coming across the ocean and becoming Americans.

What's easy to miss about the words 'God bless America,' when they trip off the tongue of a president at the end of a momentous speech or are used as a rallying call for Americans to unite under one banner, is that they're actually a prayer. The notion of blessing begins with God, who in Genesis 12 blesses Abraham, and announces that through Abraham's descendants all peoples might find a blessing. The notion of being a most blessed country has since been a prerogative of the Jews, but other nations have also assigned it to themselves: the Roman Empire most expansively, Britain in its imperial era, the Apartheid regime in South Africa notoriously. But as a friend of mine puts it, America has assigned to itself blessed nation status 'with tenure.' And for a lot of its history since 1918, America has understood that blessing in the Abrahamic sense of seeing itself as a people used by God to bring a blessing to other nations.

But the heart of what this country's struggling with, as I see it, being one who's spent a lot of the last 20 years in this country as well as the UK, is that it's hard to know how to ask God to bless America right now. Not long ago I was in Washington DC and I found friends and peers in a mixture of panic and denial about the coming November election. I did one thing on my visit, however, that gave me three thoughts about how not to feel so paralysed. I went to church.

It was a conventional Episcopalian Eucharist. But three moments struck me in a special way. The first was the Prayers of the People. I was conscious that when Donald Trump became President in 2017 there was controversy over the conventional prayer service being held for his tenure on the morning after his inauguration. It wasn't clear if the service was a quasi-constitutional upholding of the presidency, or some kind of personal endorsement of the specific office holder. As I reflected on the Prayers of the People, I pondered whether it might be too small a thing that such a prayer service be an endorsement of one administration. Surely the Holy Spirit could make it an event where a wondrously kaleidoscopic diversity of Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, Latinx Americans, Chinese Americans, trans Americans, first-generation Americans each, with support and guidance,

took the microphone to articulate their respective prayers for the ensuing four years? Who would boycott the gift of an event like that? Maybe America could be offered this invitation: 'Let your heart expand. Let your mind encompass. Let your soul grow, through meeting, enjoying and embracing one another. Because we believe we're going to spend eternity together. So we'd best start today. Because Christianity's about living God's future now.' America, like the church, shouldn't be about where we're all separately coming from. It should be about where we're all together going.

The second moment that struck me in that worship service was the offertory procession, in which the bread, wine and money were brought to the altar. As I saw this taking place, my imagination again went to what the liturgy might be saying to this divided country. I thought about Isaiah 2:2: 'In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.' I imagined every tribe and race and people streaming into this church, proudly bearing the trophies and symbols and glories of its heritage and narrative and dreams. And I pictured each walking up the aisle and placing those icons on the altar. And in leaving them at the altar, each subtly saying, 'These aren't our identities to be protected – these are our gifts to be shared.' Gifts are given to be a blessing. And perhaps the nation might behold, on livestream: behold God blessing America, behold that God has blessed America with everything it needs to flourish and to be a blessing to the world.

Just as in worship we both affirm our gifts as we let go of them and allow them to be placed on the altar to become a blessing not just to us but to all God's people, so in some kind of national pageant the whole nation could offer its gifts to bless each other. Identities could be affirmed and transcended. Possessions could be turned into gifts. Differences could become assets. Diversity could enrich. The life of the nation could become a prayer that the Holy Spirit would turn the water of its existence into the wine of God's essence, and turn life into eternal life. Maybe that's how God could bless America.

My final pondering came during the distribution of communion. I recalled a visit a few years ago to a diocesan convention in the Deep South. Clergy nervously chuckled that the political dividing line between red and blue in their diocese was the altar rail. But it wasn't as simple as that. Several congregations were that somewhat rare thing in an American church: an even split of Democrat and Republican. But rather than a source of discomfort, tension and denial, I wondered if it were a holy, rich, important opportunity. So I said, 'Your diocese could stop being an embarrassed poor relation in this country and this church. It could be a beacon of hope. Because think about that altar rail. Every Sunday your congregation comes to that altar rail; and what it's saying in doing so is this: "We may be divided on culture wars, foreign policy and migration, but this altar rail reminds us we are one body because we're members of Christ's body. And who we are together is more fundamental than what we think apart. It's too small a thing that you're self-conscious and embarrassed about your political divisions. The Holy Spirit is giving you the power to witness to the whole world about our fundamental identity as Christ's body, an identity that transcends political divisions. You are doing something amazing not just for your denomination but for the whole country – and the whole world.'" Embarrassed and evasive congregations could become known throughout the land as a beacon of hope for a process by which the most divided people in the nation find they have more in common than what separates them, and come to realise these divisions are luxuries the world can no longer afford.

The most distressing thing about the widespread dismay about the direction the US is going is the sense of powerlessness among those who long for it to choose a different path. And when those people are Christians, it's even more distressing, because in worship those people have in their daily and weekly practice the gifts God gives to reimagine the world. For Christians, politics doesn't begin or end with our choice on a voting slip; but with God's choice to be with us. For God so loved America as to give America the church so that America might behold the kinds of relating that model everlasting life and live God's future now by embodying today the way we'll dwell forever. That's what we gather round this altar to do today. Perhaps its political implications have never been more significant.