

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 06, 2024
Patronal Feast Day

Solemn Evensong
4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rt. Rev. Allen K. Shin, *Bishop Suffragan, Diocese of New York*
on
John 14:1-7

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Bicentennial Evensong

It is truly an honor to be the preacher in this Solemn Evensong as you bring to closure the year-long bicentennial celebration of this famous parish. Happy 200th Anniversary, St. Thomas! Thank you, Canon Turner, for your invitation and welcome.

Canon Carl Turner and Mother Alison Turner began here the same year I began as Bishop Suffragan ten years ago. Because of that, we bonded early on and Clara and I have enjoyed our friendship with them during these years. I am grateful for their ministry not just here at St. Thomas but also for their leadership and contribution to the life of this Diocese. Would you join me in congratulating them again for ten years of their ministry?

“Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me.”

When I was young in my early twenties, I had my entire life all planned out and had a pretty good idea what my life was going to be like. I knew where I was going and what I was going to do. I even knew what age I was going to get married and I didn't even have a girlfriend then. Well, nothing in my life has worked out as I had planned. In retrospect, thank God for that. But at the time when my life was unfolding in ways I did not plan or could control, it was bewildering and stressful. Maybe some of you have had a similar experience in your life.

Then occasionally life throws a curve ball that really leaves you in complete disarray and bewilderment. One of those moments happened to me thirty-three years ago when my younger sister suddenly died of a car accident at the age of twenty. Nothing is more tragic than having to bury your own child or your younger sibling. Nothing in life prepares you for that kind of sudden curve ball. It was the most devastating time in my life. I felt myself drowning in sorrow, anger and confusion all at once. I had no idea how I was going to get through it.

Today's gospel story is a snippet from Jesus' Passover supper with his disciples who have no idea that it would be their last Passover with Jesus. A lot of strange things have already happened.

Jesus got down on his knees and washed the disciples' feet, which confused and embarrassed them and made them feel uncomfortable. He predicted that Judas would betray him as he dipped a piece of bread in a dish and gave it to him. The others had no idea what was happening. He even predicted his own death and told them they could not go with him where he was going. When the bumbling Peter said, “I

would lay down my life for you,” Jesus predicted that he would deny him three times before the cock crow.

The disciples must have been confused and anxious about what Jesus was doing and talking about on this night, because it was at this point that Jesus said, “Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me.”

He went on to describe the Father’s house where there were many dwelling places and said that he was going ahead to prepare a place for them. Ever curious Thomas had the courage to ask the question that was on the other disciples’ minds. “We know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?” Jesus replied with a famous I-am saying: “I am the way and the truth and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me.”

Have you ever had a conversation with someone in which you and your conversation partner were talking passed each other? You thought you understood each other but really didn’t? The conversation between Jesus and his disciples is one such conversation. The disciples might have thought they understood what Jesus was saying but they clearly had no idea what he was saying.

The entire discourse is shrouded in mystery, and that is exactly the point of the gospel writer, because what was about to unfold on this Passover night was beyond human understanding and imagination. The disciples were about to have a major curve ball thrown at them, and Jesus was trying to prepare them for that. But nothing could prepare them for the unspeakable tragedy they were about to witness and experience.

From its humble beginning in a room on the corner of Broom Street and Broadway in the evening of 12th October, 1823, St. Thomas Church persevered through a number of curve balls in its life: the challenge around the foundation of its first building in 1824 as Trinity Church Wall Street were unable to help, then to see the first building destroyed by fire in 1851 and building the second church in just one year, and the decision to move because the neighborhood had “degenerated into anchorage for cheap dance halls and saloons” (Sounds to me like an exciting neighborhood for a church to be), finally moving into a new building on the present location on Fifth Avenue in 1870, only to see it destroyed by fire once again in 1905 and the new Cram-and-Goodhue-designed building completed in 1913 which now stands in the middle of one of the most expensive commercial real estates in the country.

“Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me.”

With these words, Jesus was inviting the anxious and bewildered disciples on a hitherto uncharted journey of life. And the journey was none other than to walk with him to the Cross where the way, the truth and the life would finally be revealed.

In some Christian quarters, this I-am saying of Jesus is interpreted to justify the Christian supremacy over other religions or the Christian supercessionism over the Jewish faith. Surely, as a deeply faithful rabbi himself, that was not what Jesus had in mind when he said this.

The disciples were being called to a journey they could have never imagined, the journey of death and resurrection with Jesus. And the only thing they needed for this journey was faith, the faith in the power of God’s grace and love even to raise his beloved Son from the dead.

At each curve-ball moment, the leaders of this famous parish embarked on a journey of the unknown, discerning as best as they could. In the end, though, it was a journey of faith, learning to trust God's grace to raise this church out of the ashes into a new life two times. That journey of death and resurrection has never stopped and continues in this post-pandemic time. And the only you need for this journey is faith.

When I was faced with that most devastating tragedy of my life, what helped me get through it was a little notecard I received from a parishioner at my church. It was a simple note that said, "Allen, remember that God loves you." Every bone in my body wanted to reject that love. But that simple note kept nagging at me and pulling me each step of my journey until I learned to accept and trust God's love and trust that risen Christ had prepared a dwelling place for my sister in his Father's house.

"Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me."

In this age of great anxiety with so much uncertainty, confusion, division and conflict around us, the words of Jesus call us back to what is most important in our journey of life—our faith in God and in Jesus Christ crucified and risen, who is the way and the truth and the life.

Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in him who is the way, the truth and the life.

+ In Nomine.
