

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 09, 2025
The First Sunday In Lent

Litany in Procession and Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

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Community and Growth

Some words of Pope Francis:

“Lent is the time to proclaim that God alone is Lord, to drop the pretense of being self-sufficient and the need to put ourselves at the center of things, to be the top of the class, to think that by our own abilities we can succeed in life and transform the world around us.” ^[1]

I guess if it were to be printed as a sermon from the pulpit of Saint Thomas we might give it the title, **‘It’s not just about me!’**

Over the next five Sundays, Fr. Gioia and I are going to alternate our sermons and reflect together on what it means to build community, and the difference a Christian Community can make to civil society. If any of you attended or have, since, listened to some of the excellent lectures at our Bicentennial Symposium last year, you will have noticed that theme loud and clear – that the Church, as the Body of Christ, is very much involved in civil society and engages with it on all kinds of levels. In England, where I come from, the Church of England is by law established and that means it is involved in all levels of national life – from the bishops sitting in the upper house of Legislature (The House of Lords) scrutinizing government policy, to running schools in some of the poorest areas in Europe. In the United States, Public and Private religion are meant to be kept separate but this does not mean that the Christian Church as the Body of Christ is not involved in all levels of society – from canvassing politicians to, yes, running schools in poor areas of cities. You do not need to belong to a Church ‘by law established’ to be an influencer!

So, for the Church to influence society and build a beloved community, where do we start? Over the course of these five weeks, Father Luigi and I will attempt to draw threads from one another’s sermons and weave those threads into the Gospel reading of the day. Now, that is not going to be easy! How on earth does building community and civic engagement fit in with today’s Gospel reading of Jesus in the wilderness? The Gospel seems to be simply about Jesus all on his own! Well, as Pope Francis puts it so simply, *“Lent is the time to proclaim that God alone is Lord, to drop the pretense of being self-sufficient and the need to put ourselves at the center of things, to be the top of the class, to think that by our own abilities we can succeed in life and transform the world around us.”*

Before Jesus even began his ministry, he needed to go into the wilderness to be alone, and to discover who he really was. Before he could even teach the people about God’s love and the values of the Kingdom, he had to face his own temptations to put himself first, and at the center of things. After all, isn’t that at the heart of the three temptations today?

“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.”

“To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.”

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you.’”

If you are the Son of God...

Today’s Gospel is a good starting point for us to explore what it means to build community because it reminds us that we do not start with other people – we start with ourselves; we start by examining who we are and where we are going. By so doing, we deepen our self-awareness and that is surely going to affect the way that we treat others. Now, I am not talking about going to see a psychiatrist (though, sometimes, that can be a very good thing!) – I am talking about facing our own demons in the way that Christ faced Satan in the wilderness. Jesus did not dismiss the Devil; he listened to what he had to say and reflected on it. By coming to terms with what we find difficult, like Jesus, we can discover our true self and our true calling. In other words, we discover that we really *are* made in God’s image. So many people join churches or societies to do good – to help the poor; to make a difference; to change society for the better; and they want to sign up and volunteer for absolutely everything. They forget to start with themselves. If we do not start with ourselves, there is a danger that our good works become ends in themselves and not a means to an end.

Pope Francis went on to say:

“Lent is a time of truth, a time to drop the masks we put on each day to appear perfect in the eyes of the world. Lent is a time, as Jesus said in the Gospel, to reject lies and hypocrisy: not those of others, but of ourselves. Look them in the face and grapple [with them]”

Dropping our masks means that we reveal our true selves to God. And, ironically, by dropping our masks we can learn to discover who someone else is because we are less likely to stereotype them. When I come to Neighbor to Neighbor on a Saturday morning, I am often asked by our guests if I am the pastor. And, of course, I am; but I am also someone who does not have to worry about being cold, or hungry, or being ill, or feeling unsafe. If I do not reflect on my own pretense and my own masks, I cannot change the power differential between me and those who are not guests but neighbors and, therefore, essential to my community.

After Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta died, her private letters to her confessors and spiritual directors were published. They have helped so many people because they reveal that she, too, was in the wilderness like Jesus and facing her own temptations. We all saw her as the smiling saintly figure who found it so easy to care for the poor and to pray. Instead, we discover that she knew only too well about masks. Writing to one of her spiritual directors, she said *“If you only knew what goes on within my heart. Sometimes the pain is so great that I feel as if everything will break. The smile is a big cloak which covers a multitude of pains. Pray for me, please.”*

The late spiritual giant, Henry Nouwen, spent nine months in a Trappist Monastery searching for something; searching for a deeper understanding of who he was as he struggled to see God in his life. He struggled with depression as well as the demands placed on him by those in authority in his church. His

spiritual director gave him some important words; he said this: “*The question is not so much “How to live for the glory of God?” but “How to live who we are, how to make true our deepest self?”*”

How to make true our deepest self...

His Spiritual director went on to say:

“If the glory of God is not there where I am, where else can it be?” ^[2]

So, to build community and engage with civil society, I think we have to begin ourselves. Lent is a time for self-reflection; but such reflection will help us to grow and when we try to help others it will come from the heart and not from a set of ideas.

Let me end with some words of Bishop Mary that she wrote to the clergy this week:

We who witness Jesus vanquish the devil may likewise dare to imagine the fearful landscapes of our own lives transfigured. Even the exhausted and weak among us may be brave enough to take his example, to resist evil and choose right, to speak our no and our yes. For the desert is not God-forsaken nor does it belong to the devil. The desert is God’s home. The Holy Spirit is there, within us and beside us. And if we cannot feel that Spirit inside of us or at our side, perhaps we can at least imagine Jesus there, not too far away, with enough in him to sustain us, and to make us brave. ^[3]

References

- 1 Pope Francis: Sermon preached at Basilica of Santa Sabina, Rome, on Ash Wednesday, 22 February 2023
 - 2 Henri Nouwen: ‘The Genesee Diary’ pages 70-71
 - 3 Bishop Mary Glasspool, ‘Unofficial letter’ to the Clergy of the Diocese of New York; Volume IX, Number 36 – March 7, 2025
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