

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, July 06, 2025**

The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

on

Isaiah 66:10-14; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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## Making a Difference

Between 2012 and 2017, when I taught at the Pontifical University of Saint Anselm in Rome, I started and directed a summer course on *Leadership and the Rule of Saint Benedict* with German professors from the University of Saint Gallen in Switzerland. The course was a blend of monastic wisdom and modern leadership theory. It was hands-on, dynamic, and often great fun. I remember that one of the exercises participants to the course loved most was the so-called “vision board”.

The vision board was a creative activity involving magazines, scissors, and a piece of cardboard. Participants were invited to go through random periodicals and cut out any image that caught their eye. Once they had gathered a collection, they arranged and glued the images onto a board. The result was often more than a collage — it became a window into who they were and where they felt called to go.

Scientific studies have proved that when people respond to images they tap into their intuition, uncover insights, hopes, values — get a sense of what truly matters to them. The principle is that vision is something we have to let *emerge*. Visualizing goals increases the chances of achieving them: people begin to notice opportunities, make the right choices, and feel more energized to act.

This is important not just in terms of career (the classic question: where do I see myself in 5 years?). More deeply, *vision* is about the kind of person I want to be, the kind of impact I want to have, the kind of difference I can make in the world.

To the extent that it really taps into what gives me joy, corresponds to who I really am (and not other people’s expectations on me), and includes the good I want to be the instrument of for others, working on our vision can be uniquely empowering — it can make reality, the world, or the universe if you prefer, align. This alignment is not the result of conscious willpower, but of the energy and passion that a ‘vision’ can draw out of you — energy and passion that often you did not even know you had in you!

Now there is a sense in which the page of Isaiah we heard in the first reading gives us God’s ‘vision board’:

“Rejoice with Jerusalem [...] You shall be comforted in Jerusalem. You shall see, and your heart shall rejoice; your bodies shall flourish like the grass; and it shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants” (Isaiah 66.10-14)

One of the meanings of the name “Jerusalem”, *Yerushalayim* in Hebrew, is “Vision of wholeness” or “vision of peace”. Isaiah is not referring to the city in itself – a place that throughout history and in our own days sadly is anything but a haven of peace and wholeness. More than ever, this tragic city remains a catalyst of religious tension between the three monotheist religions – a tension that, as we all know, reverberates all around the world.

In Isaiah’s passage, Jerusalem stands for the kind of society God ‘en-visions’: a place where everyone finds welcome, delight, prosperity, consolation, joy, and fulfilment. A community truly based on compassion, sharing, equity, and inclusion. A community where there is no more place for Satan – a name that means “division”. It has become evident to me that whether or not Satan exists, we are very capable of being “dividers” ourselves unassisted by any satanic entity – we excel at spreading discord and suspicion ourselves by scapegoating defenceless people, hounding them down, humiliating them, making them disappear to assuage our senseless fears. We ourselves have become skilled at shutting our eyes and hearts to other people’s needs in the name of self-preservation. We are very capable ourselves of opting out from the common responsibility to strive for justice because -so goes our alibi- the evil forces in play are so pervasive that there is little difference we can make anyway.

We can be forgiven if we find difficult to share Jesus’ optimism in today’s gospel – when he says that he “watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning”. These days we have the feeling that the agents of division are triumphant, that God’s “vision of wholeness” is more remote than ever. The invitation to “rejoice with Jerusalem” sounds naive if not downright cruel.

And yet this overlooks the formidable sway of vision.

A vision is not what we call a ‘dream’ – as when we say “I dream of a more just world”.

A vision is attuned with who we are and what matters to us, gives us access to unexpected resources – it sees something that is not realized and yet already at work – something so real that we can *already* rejoice in it, delight in it, act on it.

Great moral leaders like Gandhi or MLK changed history in this very way – they were able to galvanize millions of people by making them rejoice in their “vision of wholeness”, in their version of *Yerushalayim*.

Jesus does something similar – he tells us about God’s vision, what he calls “the kingdom of God” – the intrusion of God’s love in our human history, hidden and unobtrusive at first and yet unstoppable and invincible in the long run.

A marginal and dissident rabbi in an utterly negligible corner of the world announces that he sees a huge harvest. He sends his disciples to the whole world to face the demons of division, hatred, greed, exploitation, and idolatry and bring God’s message of wholeness to every home, to every person: “Peace to this house!”

Jesus does not send them straight away though: first he makes sure that they are won over by God’s vision – and when they come back from the first mission, he invites them to revise their vision boards, make sure they have got it right:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” Jesus said to them [...] “Do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” (Luke 10.17-20)

Jesus' vision, God's vision is not about changing the world through power. He says to the disciples: "See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves". What he means by this sentence is not: "I am sending you to be slaughtered". The wolves are those who have not been initiated to God's vision of wholeness. They treat the messengers of this vision as 'lambs' – dismiss and scorn them, until they are swept away by a novelty they never imagined, never saw coming – the wolves sometimes turn into lambs, transformed by the gentleness, persistence, and light of these messengers.

If we are tempted to give over to discouragement about whether we can make a difference then, let us not forget that we too are the bearers of God's "vision of wholeness": it might be slow in fulfilling the peace, consolation, and justice it promises, but it is at work in the world – the only thing we need are eyes to see it.

And let us not neglect to work on our own personal "vision board" – let us put imagination, energy, passion, life, love into finding out what kind of person we want to be, what kind of difference we want to make.

Never think that you have nothing to contribute. There is a difference only you have the responsibility and the opportunity to make.

More than ever, do not underestimate the ripple effect of each and every, however apparently small act of *care*. Whenever we feel deprived of agency it is so comforting to listen again to Jesus' assurance:

Whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. (Matthew 10.42).

Yesterday morning, like every Saturday, twelve volunteers from our community did just this: give a cup of cold water, and a cup of coffee, muffins and fruit – but especially welcome and hospitality to 160 neighbours in need. We know each other's names now, have a small talk with one and the other, listen to each other. Someone told me they were so grateful we were there even if it was Thanksgiving weekend – and we will carry on throughout the summer, even when other similar offers around the city close down. I was touched when one of them told me that *Neighbor to Neighbor* has become the highlight of his week.

This is the 'reward' from sharing a cup of water Jesus talks about: it creates community, makes a person feel seen and heard, restores in us a sense of agency, and is the most effective antidote to cynicism and disillusion.

Tell me that this is too small to make a difference – and forgive me if I beg to disagree!

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