

Sunday, September 07, 2025

Patronal Feast Day

Saint Thomas Choir School Convocation

**Solemn Eucharist and Installation of the Organist
and Director of Music**

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rt. Rev. Dorsey McConnell, *8th Bishop Pittsburgh (Retired)*

on

John 20:24-29

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O, My Lord! O, My God!

Forty-two years ago this summer, I began my curacy in this parish. The morning after I had been ordained deacon, I walked from the curate's apartment at 63rd and Lexington leaving about seven am to be here well in time for the 8 o'clock Mass. It was the first Sunday in June, a cool and sunny morning, and I was dressed in a new black suit, starched white shirt, and black rabat which would be my uniform for the next two years. I was feeling excited, hopeful, confident that God had made a fine choice in me, and I was determined to do my best for him. The streets were nearly empty, but at 57th and Fifth, the light was red, so I paused there on the northwest corner waiting for it to turn, and as I did so, looked casually to my right to find my reflection in the glass show window of Van Cleef and Arpels. There I was in all my collared glory, about to begin my ministry in the greatest parish in the greatest city on earth, when it suddenly hit me.

I had no idea what I was doing. (I came the same way, just now, and I tell you, the view hasn't gotten any better!)

Good grief, I thought, look at yourself, will you? How did this happen? People are going to look at the clothes and think you can actually do something, help them in some way, but you can't even begin to do it. You fooled a lot of people, McConnell, but now you're the fool, and you're going to have to live with that. And this monologue inside my head went on even after the light turned green, went on through the 8, and the 9:15, and the 11, and coffee hour, until I had a few minutes before evensong, went up to my new office, picked up my new phone and called my confessor, the Reverend doctor Thomas J Talley, professor of liturgics at General seminary. Tommy was brilliant, an outsized mind in the body of a Hobbit, with the scraggly beard that made him look like a prospector from southern Texas which was where he came from, and miraculously, on a Sunday afternoon, he picked up the phone. "Hello?" he said.

"Father, it's Dorsey," I blurted out. "Sorry to bother you, but I'm in serious trouble."

"Already?" he said. "I just heard your confession yesterday. Good God, son, what did you do?"

“It’s not what I did. It’s just that...I...I...um... I’m a fraud. I’ve been lying to God and everybody. I thought I was called to holy orders, but now that I’m here, I don’t think I can do it. I mean I... I have no idea what I’m doing, and I’m not sure I ever will.”

There was a long silence on the phone; then he sighed. “Well, congratulations,” he said. “You’re making progress faster than I thought you would. Look, boy: Of course you don’t know what you’re doing. That’s the whole point! The day you are sure you know what you’re doing is the day you will make yourself and everyone around you miserable. It’s all about God, son. God knows what He is doing. Your job is just to get out of His way.”

Now this was a surprise to me. I thought the whole purpose of my being here was to get better at what I did, to progress in the craft of priesthood, moving from McConnell Unsafe At Any Speed to McConnell Good Value Under Close Supervision until I arrived at Where Is Father McConnell and What Is He Up To Now? I wanted to have confidence in myself, and that was the problem: to know what I was doing just the way Jesus’ original disciples knew what they were doing, because they did.

Didn’t they?

Well, they thought they did. They often told Jesus they knew what they were doing. They showed him all the time, how much they knew what they were doing. Take Simon Peter for example, walking on water at the Lord’s command, which he did very well indeed, for a few seconds, before he sank, or a few of the twelve who dove right in to the task of casting out a demon from an epileptic child who, I’m sure they thought, got better for a few moments, until he got suddenly worse, leaving Jesus to bring the boy back from death’s door. You can go through the gospels and find dozens of learning opportunities that the disciples missed because they thought they didn’t need them. You can hear them arguing over who among them is the greatest, building in their imaginations a fantasy about who Jesus is, and who they are, and along with it a beautiful citadel of self-assurance, self-confidence, self-glory, all in the name of Jesus, entirely missing the point of where he is leading them, which is always the Cross. Only there do they finally realize they never had any idea what they were doing, and (worse) they really have no idea what Jesus is doing. So they act accordingly: Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, the whole lovely castle comes crashing down around their ears, and instead they find themselves huddled in a dark room behind locked doors, filled with fear, and waiting for the worst.

And none of them is more shaken than Thomas. I think that is because none of the disciples loved Jesus more than Thomas. You will recall, a few chapters earlier in John, the moment when Jesus is about to go back to Judea, where his enemies had threatened his life; the other disciples try to talk him out of it, the way Peter tries to talk him out of Calvary. It is Thomas alone who is on board, “Let us go,” he tells his friends, “That we may die with him.” He loved Jesus and he thought he knew what he was doing. He may have had a misconception of the Lord, but at least he was ready to die as a martyr for the revolution. Perhaps he could see his name in lights next to the Lord’s atop the beautiful citadel that would be built in their honor and memory. But that isn’t how it worked out, and so devastated is he by the collapse of his own little castle, that he can’t bear the thought of being in the same room with the other disciples surrounded by their collective rubble.

That is when they come, and find him, and say to him. *We have seen the Lord.* And you can understand his reaction, which is not doubt at all, but a wrenching spasm of grief born from this deep love of Jesus, along with a certain refusal to let go of what was. He is saying to them, *Stop joking. Don’t you see what we’ve lost?*

Our beautiful citadel is gone. We're never getting it back. And if the Lord has something else in mind, and you say he's alive, well then he's going to have to show me.

So, a week later, when the Lord grants his request, appearing to him now with the others, you can also understand Thomas' bewilderment, his joy, but also his terror as he comes to terms with all that he didn't know how to do, all that he had got wrong, and all the ways he never knew what he was doing, but also realizes none of that matters anymore because of what God will do, and scarily, what God will do with Thomas.

There is an ambiguity in the Greek text which people have debated for centuries, as to whether Thomas is talking directly to Jesus, saying *My Lord and My God*, or just exclaiming to anyone who might be listening, *O my God, O my Lord, what now?* I think Thomas is doing both. He kneels before the Risen Christ and adores his Lord and God, and at the same time he knows the past is gone, with all its beautiful citadel, and he sees the terrifying prospect of a completely open road into which the Lord will lead him now that Thomas has gotten out of the way.

We don't know if Thomas actually put his hands into Christ's wounds, but we are fairly sure for the rest of his days he was putting his hands into the wounds of the world, in Christ's name, to heal them. Traditional accounts assert that he followed his Lord to Malabar on the southwest coast of India and there preached the Gospel and planted churches until his martyrdom in the year 72. The Mar Toma Christians of Kerala and Tamil Nadu trace their origin to him, and still venerate his tomb at Mylapore. We should not be surprised at this. The very next, and last, story in John's Gospel, ends with Jesus double exhortation to his friends: *Follow me*, and they obviously did, across oceans, into unknown cultures and unlearned languages, because if they hadn't, my friends, you and I would not be here.

All of this to say, finally, we shouldn't be surprised at everything we celebrate today, two things in particular. First, the new beginning for the Choir School in collaboration with the Professional Children's School of New York, which is a bold move, and it is not without risk, choosing to let go of everything you thought you knew, which when you had a good, cold, hard look at it, had not been working for a long time, and so strike out onto a new road the Lord is showing this parish. My friends, West 60th Street is not far away on foot, but it might as well be Malabar, because there you will find a world of new lives, new families, and through them new neighborhoods; boys will find new friends, teachers new colleagues, singers fellow artists, and through you all, the Lord will walk, bringing all the gifts of his mercy, his holiness, his love. I have served as bishop in two Provinces of this Communion, and this is the kind of leadership I hungered for in my parishes, and whenever it happened I saw the people of God prosper and their communities blessed. And as if to multiply the blessing of Saint Thomas on all this, we are commissioning Richard Tanner as organist and choirmaster. Richard, I'm sure you were quite comfortable at Rugby, where you certainly knew what you were doing, but now you have chosen to follow God across an ocean into a city full of unknown cultures and unlearned languages, to bring us in your own way, the riches of Christ. So, brother, welcome to Malabar. And always remember,— Hey! You're with Jesus. In New York! What could possibly go wrong? Because once you start getting out of the way, and let the Lord lead you, you will always meet him on the road; as you imitate Thomas, you will meet him as well.

I had been here as deacon and priest for about a year and a half, and my ministry was gaining steam; it was then, that I fell once again into the trap of being quite pleased with myself. I lost the humility which is always the seal of the Cross. I led classes and projects and was busy in church, with church, from morning til night. Every Sunday, at the door, I was greeted with such kind words and such

encouragement, which served mainly to make me impossible. One of those who greeted me was a young woman from Barbados, with her two young sons, one ten and the other twelve. They came always formally dressed. She never puffed me up. She greeted me very politely, but she asked me only to sign the elder boy's attendance card, which her Bishop back home would require before he would confirm the child. One week in Advent, she asked if I might come to her home the following Sunday, to bless some holy water for the cleansing of their apartment. I agreed, but honestly I was a little annoyed. I mean I was really busy. I had her address in Brooklyn, but I wasn't sure where it was exactly, and I had to be back in time for evensong, but I had promised, and in spite of all the brilliant work on my desk waiting to be completed, I took a prayer book and a stole and got on the subway.

It took three trains to get to her neighborhood, and on the last one I stuck out like a sore thumb. Then there was another three block walk, before I realized this was the trip she made every Sunday, with two children, sometimes in foul weather, to come here to worship her Lord and her God. The flat was in a housing project, and after she had buzzed me in and I had walked up three flights due to the broken elevator, and down a dimly lit hallway with its graffiti on walls of green paint, she loosed the four deadbolts on her door and let me in.

It was a two bedroom flat, with one common area, where there was a desk full of books, which were hers; the boys kept theirs in their room. I learned that she cleaned offices in Manhattan during the day and studied accounting at night after she had put her children to bed. There was also a couch and a dining table where five one-gallon jugs of distilled water awaited my blessing. I used the old forms, while she and the boys stood by reverently; I exorcised the water with a little salt, then blessed all five gallons. And when it was over she immediately took a clean rag, poured a little on the table, wiped it clean, and sat me down for a cup of tea. I left an hour later. I have never been in the presence of more holiness or dignity in any room of any size.

I don't think I made it back in time for evensong, but I honestly can't remember. What I do recall, was wondering, the whole journey back to Manhattan, was it I who had brought Christ to her, or she to me. I know now, it was I who met Christ again in the home of this Apostle who had come all the way from Barbados to Flatbush, to practice her faith, and raise her family, and gain a profession, and *incidentally* to remind a young curate that although I didn't know what I was doing, the Lord always would.

I pray in utter confidence that the future of this parish will be full of such meetings for you, now that you are on this new road. I know this isn't the first time you have reached out to this city, but it is the boldest initiative. There is always a danger that a place of worship this beautiful, with a tradition this rich, can become more castle than church, more citadel than Temple. But you have chosen, my friends, in at least this bold way, to take the Temple on the road, and once you have made up your mind to do that the glory that is here will always be Christ's, never yours, and will flow out the doors into the streets, from you, bringing healing wherever it goes. I pray that as you move out further into the life of this city, you will have the eyes and heart of Thomas, encountering Christ in unlikely places, and hitherto unknown lives. When you meet him, may you have the presence of mind to pray, *O my Lord! O my God! What if I had not believed I should see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living?* For Christ's sake I ask this, and for his glory, now and forever, Amen.
