



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, March 28, 2004
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Philippians 3:8-14
+

LOSING THE WORLD, GAINING CHRIST

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Saint Paul's Letter to the Church at Philippi was written while he was in prison and in danger of death. Since Paul was imprisoned several times for disturbing the peace by preaching the Gospel of Christ, scholars have debated from which place and time the Apostle wrote his Letter. The traditional and still well-based view is that he wrote from his last incarceration, Rome, before his martyrdom in the year 64 by the Emperor Nero, who infamously blamed the Christians for the Great Fire.

Wherever Paul was while writing, his letter to the Philippians is full of warmth, joy and gratitude. It reflects the view of an author whose life may be over today, and this radical perspective gives the apostle the opportunity to consider and to share with fellow Christians what it has meant to be a minister of Jesus Christ and to give his life for the Church. Bear with me for a little more background.

Before Paul became a Christian, he was known as Saul of Tarsus. Although he was a Jew living in the Roman Empire 2000 years ago, there are several things about him that might resonate with many here at Saint Thomas Church.

Saul of Tarsus was well born. He was a free-born Roman citizen, a status that cost a great sum to procure if you did not have it. He was also proud of his Jewish ancestry (Paul couldn't resist mentioning it to the Philippians). He was wealthy enough to leave Tarsus (a very large and cosmopolitan city in Roman times) and to study in Jerusalem with the leading Jewish intellectual of the day, the Rabbi Gamaliel.¹ Though young, Saul became a leader in Judaism, working for the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing council in Jerusalem. He led in the effort to suppress the disruptive sect that had arisen in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by the Romans and was now being represented by his followers not only as Israel's Messiah but as risen and alive after his death. Little did Saul know that his pursuit of the Christians would lead to a life-changing moment of truth, an encounter with Jesus that (as Father Bodie pointed out recently) has given its name to conversion – the "Damascus Road Experience."

¹ Acts 21:39 "I am a Jew, from Tarsus of Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city."

When we think of our efforts to educate ourselves and our children; to improve ourselves in terms of intellectual and aesthetic life, conversation, and conduct in society; and to establish our name and reputation; and when we realize that all these ambitions also meant a great deal to Saul of Tarsus – we might well wonder at him, now the Apostle Paul, writing from jail at the end of his life. Looking at his prison walls and considering that he could be living the last day of his life, Paul rejoices at what he has gained and expects still more. “I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” He has no regrets; instead, he has his mind even beyond death: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

Over my own thirty years of ministry, when I have read these words of the Apostle, I want to stop, close my eyes, put my head back in my chair and exhale. What has always moved me about today’s passage is *what it says about what really matters*. It measures loss and gain. Looking back on his life and career, Paul sees that he has indeed suffered great losses. But he is not depressed by these losses, for they have involved a priceless gain, a great hidden treasure.

The treasure Paul found is the kingdom of God. When a man finds this treasure buried in a field, as Jesus put it in his parable, he covers it up and quickly goes and in joy sells all that he has to buy the field in order to gain the treasure. (Mt 13:44)

The knowledge of Jesus Christ discloses the kingdom of God. Faith in Christ is not merely an idea or formula in your mind. It is a deep, ongoing relationship of trust, a *communion*, with the risen Lord Jesus. It means that life itself can now be spoken of as *life in Christ* (Paul coined the phrase), and the future, unknown as it is, is a journey *into Christ*, who is himself the beginning of the pilgrimage, the way, and the destination. It is a life also lived in fellowship with others, fellow Christians, who share with us the joy of having discovered God’s kingdom and who are members with us, in what Paul so richly described as the Body of which Christ is the Head. This Eucharist is a demonstration of that communion, both vertical and horizontal, with the Head and his Members, through the sacramental mystery of Christ’s Body and Blood.

Good ancestry, good education, good name, reputation and position in society are not to be despised. Then there is wealth. In New York of all places, one can see how money makes the world go round. There are other forms of wealth, most of us would (or should) agree, that are greater – things like the true love of friends and family, honor, integrity. These are riches money can’t buy. Yet none of these is that priceless treasure, the golden secret for living life and facing death.

The “secret” is quite open and public, yet it escapes people’s notice. Knowing God in Christ is the possession of supreme excellence, of absolute surpassing worth, for the urgent business of living and dying. In the scale of value, all else is loss by comparison. Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, said Jesus, and all necessities shall be added unto you. Do not be anxious. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us how to abound and how to suffer need; how to rejoice and how to grieve; how to endure sickness and how to enjoy health; how to live and how to die.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.