



**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, November 22, 2009
The Feast of Christ the King

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Robert H. Stafford

on
Mark 11:1-11

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A SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING

Today, as New York City prepares to look a lot like Christmas, the Church concludes its annual calendar with the Feast of Christ the King. A new year begins next Sunday with the start of the four week Advent season.

Before I comment on Christ the King, I want to make a few personal remarks.

In recent months, I have been asking myself, “Do I hang on, or do I let go?”

Obviously, I have answered that question.

So, this is also the occasion for me to say farewell to you before I set off early tomorrow for a very hot place; Palm Springs, my future home, where it can be said, some like it hot!

Not to be confused with Palm Beach, Florida, Palm Springs, is a desert resort town of about 47,000 people in the Coachella Valley of southern California, about two hours east of both San Diego and Los Angeles, situated at the base of the San Jacinto mountain range.

Long a destination for snowbirds from Minneapolis and Chicago it has also been a Hollywood hide-away since the 1930's. Famous for its natural beauty, Palm Springs is also known for its post-modernist houses, and is also the site of the iconic modernist Kauffman residence by architect Richard Neutra.

Talk of houses, now reminds me of Scripture and the warning about building a house on sand, wherein one is told to build instead on a surer foundation, like rock.

This makes me nervous.

Most of what constitutes Palm Springs is sand; lots of it. And, the city is situated on the San Andreas fault which cuts through the Valley. So, at some point, and, with confidence in my coverage with Chubb insurance, I expect there will come a time when there will be a whole lot of shakin' goin' on! But, in California, life is always somewhat of a gamble when it comes to terra firma.

I want to thank many of you for your kind words, notes of encouragement, and good wishes, which have been a help and support during a stressful and difficult time. Preparing for retirement has been, surprisingly for me, one of the hardest things I have done. I thought it would be a breeze. It was not.

And, thanks, also, especially to Fr. Mead, under whom I have been pleased and honored to serve in this parish these past thirteen years. He has been a friend and counselor, priest and mentor from whom I have learned much. Few people know that without his help, I could not have done the work at Manhattan Plaza that I did before returning to this parish full time five years ago.

And, thanks as well to Fr. Andrew, under whom I also served in the 1980's.

Like Shakespeare's Henry IV, it could be said that I can be read and understood in two parts!

T S Eliot once wrote that "old men ought to be explorers" (Four Quartets, II.5). I think he is saying that adventure and discovery are not solely the property of youth. Wise Mr. Eliot is also saying something more; that adventure and discovery keep us, at any age, young and vital.

Adventure and discovery are the reason I came to New York in the early 1980's when I was in my mid-thirties; stars in my eyes, a dreamer, a young man on an odyssey.

Looking back, was it worth it?

Yes; it demanded everything; tested all I had to give and knew; taught me; molded me; at times horrified me or delighted me; grieved me. But, those are also words that describe New York as a city of and for adventure and discovery, which it most certainly is.

Someone once told me, I'd never survive in New York.

However, millions, like us, do just that, defy the dire warnings and survive!

And, although this town is a tough place, it is also a big-hearted city, where the kindness of others can play a key role in who makes it here, as the saying goes.

E B White, in his insightful essay about New York, once said that anyone who comes here must be prepared to be lucky.

I read and re-read that essay long before coming east from Minnesota. And, I believed what White said.

As I look back, indeed I was lucky, albeit some would call this my propensity for magical thinking. But, I have always believed life needs some magic, like Christmas for example, or it would be a very tiresome world.

Saint Thomas Church, for me, and I suspect for many others, has been and is such a place of magic; a powerful tribute to the Almighty in stone, glass, and music posing a contrast to the power of the great city of Mammon surrounding it; a witness and sentinel to a world of spiritual adventure and discovery, that is also the mercy, forgiveness, and peace of God.

An ancient Roman adage reminds that "All things change, and we are changed in them."

How very grateful I am for you and the changes we have experienced together as we made that step by step adventure and discovery together week after week through daily life to the promise of a new Jerusalem. Again, how lucky I am to have known such fellow travelers as you.

Honestly and simply put, like many of you, I have loved this place.

And, again, like you, I have known love here in its many forms as well.

Where there is love (*ubi caritas*, as the motet that is sung on Maundy Thursday states), there not only is God, but there also is always adventure and discovery. I think this is because love changes/opens anyone it touches, in both small and great ways. It makes us more our selves, just as the absence of it diminishes or impoverishes us.

Although one never leaves the priesthood any more than one leaves their baptism, both being life-long covenants, I do step forward into retirement wondering and concerned about the future of Anglicanism. It seems to me so fractured, conflicted, and frightened. And, a fractured, conflicted, and frightened creature can some times be a difficult, wounded animal. About this, I don't have any answers, apart from saying that the history of the church is at times just that, and that I was glad to know the Church when and how I did growing up and working here. I'd be lost without it and lost as well without Anglicanism's wonderful sense of humor and delight in the secular.

Like the wounded Church, I think we have all at some point in our life been a fractured, conflicted, and frightened creature, because that is part of the human dilemma; people get broken in living in a world that is captive to fear, violence, and death.

Nearly forty years ago, I began my professional life in the Church in such condition. I didn't know it then, but I was alcoholic. I didn't want to be, having grown up around it and seen first hand its tragic nature and consequences.

Being alcoholic is no way to begin anything; a career, a relationship, whatever. But I did.

And, here again, I was lucky. Thirty-seven years ago this month, I began that great adventure and discovery called, sobriety. About this awakening that still continues to amaze and dazzle me, I claim no virtue, only steadfastness. It was God's good doing, and I was simply ready to try something different than the painful and messy pathway I had made. In return, I have received my character and have been given the power to live fully what to me now seems an odd and at times costly priestly vocation that for me has been the proverbial pearl of great price and guardian of my soul's health.

Today's feast day of Christ the King, is about God's intervention into the fear and brokenness of our lives. It tells us that we made the Son of God bear the suffering we could not bear, giving to him the shameful and mocking kingship of the Cross; his royal sacrifice saving us and opening the gates of heaven to all.

Yet, from the powerlessness of the Cross, the power of God reigns; not in earthly might, but clothed in the royal robes of mercy, forgiveness, and peace; the power of Divine Love, in other words, to transform and transfigure, poured out for all time and all peoples in the sacred defeat and sacrifice that is ultimately God's triumph and our victorious entrance into new, eternal life.

We are each and all lucky to have a God such as this; which is to say, One that is willing to make us and this world what we and it are not. This is easy to forget. Yet, it is the message of our faith as Christians, for we are on a road of transformation, what the Church calls transfiguration, so that we, by Grace, can be made like unto him who is our Lord and God.

I have said good bye to you once before in 1991. Never did I expect I would say it again, but life has its ironies and surprises, and it is once again that time which comes to all relationships, only today seems more complex, harder, than that first farewell nearly twenty years ago in this same pulpit, wherein I am reminded that in this passage of nearly two decades we are now the same and different.

A man I once knew said to me that we are known best and most fully in our absence, that parting completes our knowing one another and gives us a clearer vision and understanding in which truths can emerge that heretofore might have been hidden or eclipsed.

I have seen those words proved true over the decades with the many partings one knows in a world where all people, places, things, and events are passing away. So, I am confident that in the days ahead we shall come to know one another more fully in new light cast upon the familiar landscape of recollection.

People ask me what I shall remember about St. Thomas Church.

To answer that, I can say my memories run in two directions; 1) the serious and, 2) the not so serious.

About the serious, I shall especially remember two occasions: 1) the early August morning that I was summoned to the emergency room at NY Hospital, Fr. Andrew critically injured as a result of a savage attack and mugging; and, (2) the events of 9/11 and its effect on this city, our nation, and the world.

As to the not so serious, three episodes come to mind: 1) a fashion event - when the three Bulgari girls, beautiful women, each of them, entered the 11 AM service wearing complete ensembles of their distinctive Roman coin daytime jewelry and swathed in Fendi furs; 2) a security breach - the day Lord and Lady Cathcart were seated in the front row at 11 AM., when just before the start of the service a man came down the center aisle and sat behind them. Nothing unusual about that, except this man was a type known to New Yorkers; the type who can empty a subway car because he hasn't seen a bathtub in God knows how long. One needed a gas mask within thirty feet of this unknown worshipper, but true to their breeding, Lord and Lady Cathcart did not even flinch through the service. And, 3) an "I don't believe it" moment - a few years ago at communion, a man stood up after receiving the host and chalice. Again nothing unusual, except his pants were no longer around his waist, and there he was before all just as God made him!

Much more could be said. But, I'll leave it at that. Where else but here? That is why St. Thomas, I think, breeds a certain kind of heartiness and broadness of attitude in the spiritual life. How gloriously Anglican that is! And, how it reminds me to remain open to adventure and discovery any where/any time, for there God often is to be found, or better said, there God finds us!

Tomorrow, I shall be in my new home in Palm Springs; "a sunny place for shady people," as the author Joseph Wambaugh termed it!

“Bob,” my dad would herein interject, “You can’t talk like that in the pulpit. People just don’t understand humor like that. I don’t know what makes you say those things.”

Well, honestly, I don’t know either. And, some things you just can’t figure out or simply don’t care to untangle; like, for example, a messy drawer or desk - they just are the way they are.

But, you, wonderful congregation that you are, have always let me do just that; be my tangled self and let me speak as I do and be who I am. We all want that, I think; to be loved. Your acceptance is no small gift. And, I know no other congregation that is or would be so generous or so kind. I felt at home here. It was home. And, I shall miss it, and I shall miss you.

Thank you. God’s blessing.