



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, July 5, 2020
The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Zechariah 9:9-12 and Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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“King of the Shanty Town”

The international charity, *Habitat for Humanity*, estimates one in four of the world’s population currently live in a slum or informal settlement ¹. All cities in the world attract numbers of homeless, the poor, and refugees; next to these cities, you will find shanty towns where the poor and the refugee create communities that are in stark contrast to the wealth of their neighbors, with their financial districts, shopping malls, and government buildings. Khayelitsha Township in Cape Town, South Africa, has over 400,000 residents; Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, 700,000; Dharavi in Mumbai, India has 1,000,000 inhabitants; Neza, Mexico, 1.2 million; and Orangi Town in Karachi, Pakistan, an astonishing 2.4 million.

Those encampments around the world are fragile and often unhealthy gatherings of the poor and the marginalized - conurbations built near rubbish dumps in India and South America; corrugated iron and cardboard cities in South Africa and the Sudan. Once, my wife and I were enjoying a vacation in Jamaica and we were taken to a beautiful hotel to admire the view and enjoy a cooling drink. We left our group and went exploring the garden at the back of the hotel where we discovered a shanty town way down below in a valley of Montego Bay – it had no running water or sewers. Our host told us that it was regularly washed away in storms. As we sat looking down from the safety of an exclusive hotel, our drinks became somewhat unpalatable.

We are foolish to think that social deprivation is disappearing or, worse, that it belongs to another age. Jesus himself said to his disciples “*The poor you will always have with you.*” (Mark 14:7)

Jerusalem was no exception to this. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we read of a city proud, and strong, and surrounded by a mighty wall. We know that the wall was substantial because when Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem in 589 BC, it was over two years before he gained entry. And just like any modern city, Jerusalem had its own shanty town – built outside the city wall. That shanty town, where the poor, the homeless, the outcasts, the lepers, and the refugees lived was not afforded the security of that city wall. It was in dramatic contrast to the rich and powerful buildings within the holy city– with the Temple and Royal Palace complex standing far above. And some biblical scholars believe that this shanty town had a name... ***The daughter of Zion.***

If it is true that ‘Daughter of Zion’ refers to the shanty town of ancient Jerusalem, then the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the Daughter of Zion take on a new and powerful meaning. For, they suggest

that redemption would not come through the powerful, the rich or, indeed, those who lived within the safety of the walls of Jerusalem. Instead, God would turn everything upside down.

When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city in 587, he took all the powerful, aristocratic, wealthy, and (most importantly) the *skillful* people to Babylon, leaving behind a remnant – the poor for whom he had no use. Through the voice of the prophets, God made his voice heard through those who were poor.

Zechariah, writing at the time of the return of the exiles some 70 years later, specifically uses the Daughter of Zion as the model for restoration hope and, significantly, the restoration of the monarchy was to be based on a different model:

“Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

But it is not the use of the donkey or the colt that we should concern ourselves with but, rather, the word ‘humble’ or as translated in King James Version, **lowly**. The Hebrew word that we translate as ‘humble’ or lowly is not about gentleness or modesty – after all, Zechariah says that this King will *“cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”* That does not sound like modesty to me! No, the Hebrew word for humble here is a word associated with *poverty* or being *socially disadvantaged*.² The King about whom Zechariah prophesies would be at one with those whom Nebuchadnezzar left behind at the exile – those who were considered worthless; it was to be a new world order.

Many had looked for their Savior to come as a great leader in the form of one of their greatest kings – King David – like a warrior; the one who had made Israel strong and rich, and one who would raise up the army of Israel and assert her independence once more. So, no wonder when Jesus was born in a cave and preached peace, few, at first, recognized him as the Messiah. But who *did* recognize him? The poor, the outcast, the prostitute, the tax- collector, the sinner, the leper, the widows who had nothing, and the little children. They recognized him. His mother was a poor girl from Nazareth but she understood that God would put down the mighty from their seat and exalt the humble and meek.

And when we read of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, Matthew uses again those same words of Zechariah, *“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* (Matthew 21:5). So, now we know that the word humble or lowly is an association with the poor and the socially disadvantaged, we realize that Jesus is unlike any other king. He is not modest and gentle because his first act after entering into Jerusalem was to cleanse the Temple – driving out those who were buying and selling and overturning the tables of the moneychangers. The Chief Priests and the Scribes were furious with him but after that violent act, who was it that flocked to him? Matthew tells us that it was the **blind and the lame**, those who had nothing; socially disadvantaged persons.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus expresses his frustration that people cannot recognize God’s sovereignty in their midst. They are fickle, like children who refuse to agree on which game to play with one another and end up sulking. Jesus prayed to his heavenly Father and is filled with inspiration as he gives thanks - *makes eucharist* – with the Father and says, *“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”*

It is a new age where power and status count for nothing.

And then, we hear those amazing words that have brought so much comfort to so many people through the ages: *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

It seems that for those who are carrying heavy burdens, Jesus apparently wants them to carry even more – to take his yoke – like an ox or a horse when it plows a field. How can he relieve burdens if he expects people to take on more? To understand what he means, we must turn to the rabbinical tradition of the day. The rabbis at the time of Jesus used the idea of ‘taking on the yoke’ as a metaphor for entering deeply into the meaning of the Torah or Law. By associating the yoke with himself, Jesus is encouraging his friends – encouraging us – to enter more deeply into the kind of relationship that he enjoys with his Father; not just to take on his teaching, but to allow our lives to be transformed through his example of humble service.

My friends, God is still working like that today. God chooses to dwell with the poor as well as the rich. God can change the world through those who see themselves as powerless even when they may feel that they have no voice. Jesus is the voice of the voiceless because he is the Word made flesh who is humble of heart and who gives true rest.

Some words of Saint Oscar Romero preached on these same readings some 42 years ago:

“This is the Eucharist we’re going to celebrate: the Eucharist of the poor, the Eucharist of those who trust completely in God, the Eucharist of those who do not hate but forgive. This is the Eucharist of all of us who know that we need God and who pray for one another as the Lord’s little ones so that we’ll receive from God the richness that he gives only to the simple and the humble and denies to the proud and the arrogant.” (sermon preached on July 9, 1978)

¹. <https://habitatspringfieldmo.org/world-habitat-day/>

². אֲנִי (‘ani’ which can be translated as ‘poor’).