



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

Sunday, November 1, 2020
All Saints' Day

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3; and Matthew 5:1-12
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Grace, Gratitude, and Generosity

In one of his pandemic updates a few days ago, Governor Cuomo said this: *"The impact that COVID has had on the physical and mental health of many New Yorkers cannot be overstated."* Today, we turned our clocks back one hour and, for a brief moment, the mornings will seem brighter. But as we move into the depths of winter, the days will continue to become shorter, and that one-hour change will seem ridiculous; for most of us, we want to turn the clock back eight months!

Today, we begin a month of remembering. November is the month of All Saints... and All Souls; of Veterans' Day... and Thanksgiving Day; of Remembrance Sunday... and the Feast of Christ the King. It is a month of contrasts. We remember our loved ones who have been parted from us through death and yet we celebrate the joy of heaven and the Communion of Saints. We remember our war dead and those who paid the supreme sacrifice, and yet we gather with our friends and families on Thanksgiving Day. And this month, in the Northern Hemisphere, is also marked by the changing seasons as Fall begins to change into Winter.

Yes, these past months have certainly been an ordeal and the approaching winter may fill many of us with dread.

Our first reading from the Book of Revelation speaks of those who have come through a great ordeal, and who have found new life in the presence of God. *"They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life..."*

But listen to how intimate is that relationship between God and his people. He does not simply protect them from distress; he does not command an angel to comfort; instead, **God** *'wipes away all tears from their eyes.'* He, himself, wipes away all tears.

Through the darkness, we glimpse the warmth and the light of God who encourages us to live hopeful lives. *"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are,"* says Saint John. God's beloved – who are made in his image and are deeply precious to him. And although, sometimes, we may feel that life is hard, and the loss of loved ones fills us with grief, and perhaps we also feel a sense of

unworthiness, we can listen to those words of Saint John and find hope: *“What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.”*

Grace, Gratitude, Generosity. God floods this broken world, this broken life with Grace. And remember how our dear and, yes, saintly, Libby Clark used to explain the word Grace? With a beaming smile that I will never forget, she used to say *“Grace is God’s riches at Christ’s expense.”* How can we not fail to be grateful for such an outpouring of love and redemption? *“So God loved the World that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* Grace upon grace that stirs up in each one of us such gratitude for the immensity of that love which, in turn, should well up from deep within each one of us, a sense of generosity. On Friday, at mass, we read from the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, which he wrote from prison, and yet with great joy: *“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you... It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me.”* And such gratitude from Paul, flowing from an outpouring of Grace is expressed in generosity of spirit in spite of his own ordeal. Listen to what he suggests as the antidote to despair: *“This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.”* (see Philippians 1:1-11). **That your love may overflow.**

That, my friends, is what we need today and what will help us through whatever ordeal we are currently facing. Grace, gratitude, and generosity. Overflowing so that it affects the lives of those around us. In last week’s Gospel, Jesus reminded us of the two great commandments – to love God and to love our neighbor – which, in turn, is at the heart of this Church’s mission statement: *“Our Mission is to worship, love and serve Our Lord Jesus Christ through the Anglican tradition and our unique choral heritage.”* And it’s been hard these past eight months – our church building was closed for so long, unable to be an oasis of prayer for the people of midtown Manhattan. Our great Choral tradition has been silenced for too long; our soup kitchen has been unable to function; and everything moved on-line. But, my friends, grace has still been poured into our parish and its school by a loving God, and love has overflowed in so many magnificent ways from this beloved community, touching the hearts of many on our streets and in their homes – in hospitals and in homeless shelters; and gratitude for all that we sometimes take for granted has resulted in generosity in so many different ways. Today, as we launch our Annual Appeal, we do so rooting that appeal on those three words – Grace, Gratitude, and Generosity.

Over these past months, we have had so much to challenge us and, yet, time and time again I have heard stories of faith – stories filled with God’s grace – stories of gratitude – and stories of deep and overflowing generosity. For many of you, you have turned this time of challenge into a time of opportunity and we can do that together as we move into 2021.

I was looking back at a sermon I preached six years ago in which I commented on the generosity of the dead that has supported the life and mission of this Church for so long but how we would be foolish to take that for granted. As we celebrate the month of holy souls, let us also celebrate the living stones of this Church – let us take our responsibility seriously for its future growth and well-being. To the many of you who are worshipping with us on-line, and have been doing so for many months, and may continue to do so for years to come you, too, can be a part of something so much bigger. Join us – help us – support us – for in so doing, you give back to God in the same way that he lavishes his love on you.

These are exceptional times, my friends. But this day is a defiant celebration of God’s redeeming love – All Saints’ Day says to the world that God’s love will conquer. We heard it in our Gospel reading – the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Blessed are those who mourn...

Blessed are the meek...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

Blessed are the merciful...

Blessed are the pure in heart...
Blessed are the peacemakers...

Now, you won't hear that on any news station today, or tomorrow. You are unlikely to hear it in any government chamber in any country of the world; you certainly won't hear it in election hustings! But you *have* heard it proclaimed afresh today in this place. We can be that Blessed community that contradicts the pessimism and fatalism of our world, because we put God first. We acknowledge our place in his plan. We know that we are called to be like him.

In the Rectory, there is a lovely painting that used to belong to Father Andrew; it is reminiscent of Caravaggio's great painting *'The Incredulity of Thomas'* which I have always loved for its physicality, and Jesus gently guiding the finger of Thomas directly into his wounded side while two other apostles crowd in, their faces amazed. The gospel does not tell us if Thomas touched the Lord's wounds; in fact, his response to the invitation from Jesus is as immediate as it is startling: *"My Lord and my God!"* to which Jesus gives **a blessing**; but to whom does he give this blessing? Dearly beloved, **he gives the blessing to you and to me!** *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."*

Archbishop Michael Ramsey had a beautiful description of these words of the Lord; he described them as *"The last Beatitude."* He described these words as, somehow, linked with Christ's Sermon on the Mount – his manifesto of the Kingdom of God and how things would be turned upside down; not as the world would have them. Almost as if the sermon was not complete until Jesus appeared to his disciples in the upper room after his Resurrection, turning bad news into good news - and what is another Christian word for good news? *'Gospel'*.

"Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (John 20:29)

Preaching on this same text, some 50 years ago, Michael Ramsey said these words, and they read as fresh today as they did then – almost as if they were written for these difficult times: *"So to all of us the last Beatitude is spoken. Happy are you, you in any century, you in any place...you in any part of the world, you perhaps who are in cruel grief and sorrow, you perhaps who are bewildered and frustrated: happy are you, happy because though you do not see Jesus your Easter faith is sure."*¹

Which, I guess, is another way of saying, "Grace, gratitude, and generosity."

¹. Sermon preached in Canterbury Cathedral, Easter 1972. Published in 'Canterbury Pilgrim'