



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

December 13, 2020
The Third Sunday of Advent

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

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The Highway to Justice and Mercy

**Solemnities are vain,
words are empty,
music a waste of time,
prayer useless and
rites nothing but lies
if they are not transfigured by
justice and mercy.**

Words of Joseph Gelineau, the great Roman Catholic Liturgist of the 1970s.

At the heart of any great liturgy of the church lies the reality of the Word made flesh – Emmanuel – ‘God with us.’ God breaking into our world, challenging us to see that world and the people around us differently – through *his* eyes rather than through the limited vision of our own. How tragic it is, therefore, when the words of the liturgy become formulaic answers to the monotony of people’s lives or, worse, an escape from the reality of our daily living. The liturgy of the church is a vehicle for the transforming power of God to break into a broken and fragile world and, therefore, into our sometimes broken and fragile lives.

None of this is new. It is found at the heart of the message of the prophets. Time and time again, the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures called their hearers to repentance, and particularly those concerned with the law and the ritual embodiment of that law in worship.

From our first lesson today, *“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.”*

The words of Joseph Gelineau echo the words of the prophets:

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Justice and mercy are to be at the heart of what it is to be in a covenant relationship with God. Sadly, as we read in the Gospel narratives, many who spent their whole lives studying the Law – entering deeply into its meaning - could not cope with anything or anyone who differed from their own world-view.

In our Gospel reading today, we hear of John the Baptist standing in that same tradition of the prophets and those who studied the law sent the priests and Levites to interrogate him. He rattled them, he was different to them, and he challenged their comfortable understanding of God. The law was meant to release captives and prisoners; it was intended to be good news to the poor and the marginalized; but, instead, all John saw in the scribe and pharisees was self-righteousness and hypocrisy - a refusal to be open to the activity of God staring them in the face. Their worship and their spiritual lives had become dulled by mere ritual observance.

And so, God sent his own Son into the world. The same eternal Word that those pharisees and scribes were searching for in the Scriptures and yet failed to recognise. John pointed to Jesus – the Word made Flesh – who embodied, who *enfleshed* all that could not be made possible under the old covenant. In this new covenant, sealed with his own blood, all would have the chance for new life, salvation, and integrity given regardless of their place in society. *“He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”*

“Look – there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” said John. *“I must decrease and he must increase.”* Or as Michael Ramsey loved to say, *“less of self, more of Christ – that is the truth of what we believe.”* **Less of self – more of Christ.** Becoming Christlike means bringing the reality of God’s vision of justice and mercy to the heart of our everyday lives, and that means to the heart of the Christian Community, and to the Church, no matter how uncomfortable that seems. Preaching in Advent in 1977, Archbishop Oscar Romero said this:

“A religion of Sunday Mass but of unjust weeks does not please the Lord. A religion of much praying but with hypocrisy in the heart is not Christian. A Church that sets itself up only to be well off, to have a lot of money and comfort, but that forgets to protest injustices, would not be the true Church of our divine redeemer.”¹

Do you recognize the synergy between the teaching of Jesus and the call of those first prophets? How significant, that Jesus chose that very same text from Isaiah as the lesson that he would read when he first visited the synagogue in Nazareth. It is the same teaching that we find in the sermon on the Mount; the same teaching that Jesus put into practice in the way that he spoke to the marginalized, to the sick, the poor, the uneducated, the women, the outcast, the tax collector, the prostitute, and the sinner. When the priests, the scribes, and the pharisees shunned such people, Jesus reached out and touched them, or stooped to wash their feet.

Over the past few months, our on-line congregation has grown and we regularly receive emails from you. As I was pondering today's readings, I received a beautiful email from someone in California. He says that I can share part of it with you – it moved me because he was cut off from his church community and turned to Saint Thomas on-line. He wrote this:

"As weeks became months, I found myself losing hope that matters might improve. It seemed to me that the church was fine with things as they were. They were taking their orders from the governor and not from what Christ has told us to do."

I grew up during the HIV crisis in the 80's and 90's. I had many friends who came down with the disease and what I saw that was hardest for many of them was the way others treated them. People were afraid to approach them or give them a hug. I had one friend whose family wouldn't even touch him. I don't know how many times he came over just to be held as he cried in my arms. I realized then and there that whether I live or die is not nearly as important as how I treat others."

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The prophecy of Isaiah we heard today is one of hope and restoration; the desert will blossom, the eyes of the blind opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped, and the lame shall leap like a deer. Words which, no doubt, inspired Jesus and were central to his understanding of the values of the Kingdom of God and repeated back to John at the end of his short life as he sat demoralised in a prison cell.

At the end of Chapter 62, the prophet Isaiah speaks of a highway that will make it possible for all to have access to God: *"prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples."*

That highway is not a narrow way, but an expansive 'mother-of-all-highways,' one in which there is room for all to find their way to Jerusalem which is, now, the symbol of unity and restoration not only for the people of Israel but for all the redeemed.

John the Baptist did not live to see that highway, and his short walk to freedom was to his death. Jesus, too, would take his own walk – carrying the cross, carrying the burden of so much sin, carrying the burden of so many of us, which would end in his death, but a death that would change the world for ever and begin the creation of that super-highway.

Shortly after the announcement of Nelson Mandela's death, a South African being interviewed by the BBC said these beautiful words - *"Nelson Mandela is now taking the longest walk to his freedom – but the one that, ultimately, really matters."* As Mandela's coffin was driven on the highway, the people of South Africa knew exactly what to do – they didn't stand in respectful silence; they rejoiced and sang!

I think if I had been locked up for 30 years, I would have left prison bitter and hateful, having had plenty of time to plot revenge. But Nelson Mandela turned his prison sentence into a kind of 'retreat' in which he was transformed as a person. Even the investigations into the atrocities of the apartheid era, was marked by his insistence with Archbishop Desmond Tutu that it was to be a process of *truth and reconciliation*.

And that, my friends, is one of the reasons we call this Sunday *Gaudete* – a Sunday on which we are called to *rejoice*, but not in the way the world would expect. We rejoice not in spite of but *because of* the challenging message of the prophets; as today's collect said, "*Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.*" We, too, are stirred up, from our apathy and challenged to open our eyes to see the world and the people around us differently; to discover Jesus in the most unexpected of places, thus allowing our faith and our spiritual journeys to be transfigured by the practice of justice and mercy.

Or, to put it another way, as my predecessor Father John Andrew preached one Christmas Eve in this Church:

*"God has the habit of visiting us in his socks – without shoes, so to speak. He never gives us time to put our faces right to greet him, or smooth our hair, or hide our untidinesses under the sofa cushion. There never is the best time for us to meet him, and he is always different from the way we picture him to be. In a line waiting for food, not at an appearance for an Oscar award evening. Among the dispossessed and fearful, not making a triumphant arrival in a tuxedo."*²

1. Sermon preached on December 4, 1977

2. From 'Nothing Cheap and Much that Cheerful'