



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

May 9, 2021
The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Festal Evensong
3pm

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Leviticus 25:1-17 and Matthew 13:24-34a
+

The Jubilee Trumpet

In early Israel, every fifty years, or so, the Torah tells us, a trumpet would sound. Its long-awaited bright tone did more than echo through the streets, it was far more powerful than that. The reverberation declared good news for the humble and meek, the sound changed their lives for the better. For the prisoners the tone released them from their cells. For those enslaved through war or circumstance the tone set them free. For the indentured servants of the time the tone delivered them from their required toil. On top of that, at the sound of that Jubilee trumpet, all leases were broken, all debts were forgiven. The mercy of the Lord, the one who gave them life, the ground below, and the heavens above, that mercy, at the Jubilee trumpet, became especially manifest, especially magnified. So many things that we consider owed to us from our neighbor, deserved as ours by right, so much hard logic of recompense just fell away, at the sound of that trumpet, and in the light of that mercy to which the entire society said “Yes.” After all, it was by the gift of God, the mercy of God, that Israelites had been delivered from their bondage, another gift of God was a land of their own, with a society founded on that. Their insight was that any bondage or debt or slavery could last no more than two generations, otherwise its power would claim them, override the gifts of God, by their allowing them to become everlasting, and by living under these strictures they would be twisted into something other than the children of God. And so, they blew the Jubilee trumpet to declare the year of the Lord’s favor, unleashing themselves from the power of from contracts and chains.

Alas, we don’t hear the sound of that trumpet anymore. It has been so long since we heard it, that one doubts that it could be possible. But, oh yes, I assure you it is. Our debts are created by us, our contracts written by us, our prisons built and secured by us. If we chose, the trumpet could sound again. It may be economic anathema, moral hazard for some, but it is decidedly not impossible.

Can you imagine the sound of the Jubilee trumpet in our time, in our place? What would happen if all debts were forgiven every fifty years? What if people didn’t have to pay their loans anymore, honor all sorts of contracts? What would happen if all the incarcerated were released? Would that be good news for you? Bad news? Or worse? You know, if you knew that the year of the Lord’s favor was coming, you might live your life differently, wouldn’t you? It wouldn’t just change the world at the sound of the trumpet, but in the anticipation of the sound, as well. You might be sure that you were ready for the sound of that trumpet. You might treat the indentured, the imprisoned, the trapped, quite differently. Wouldn’t everyone, knowing that that balance was assured, at least every now and again.

It is generally believed that the Jubilee Year was abandoned after the exile of the northern ten tribes, the 700s BC, and then during the Second Temple period. They believed that the Jubilee Year only applied when all of the people of Israel were in the land God promised them, each tribe in its own territory. Almost like they felt that God had broken his promise, so why should they keep theirs.

And so it is striking when Jesus, in his home synagogue, hundreds of years after it languished, declared that the Jubilee is taking place. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he read from Isaiah’s scroll “to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the year of the Lord’s favor (in other words, the Year of Jubilee)” He tells them all that this scripture is now fulfilled. His people are astonished, and that astonishment enflames to fury when Jesus teaches how the scriptures show that not only the Jews, but also the Gentiles, are part of this restoration. He’s nearly killed for this. But there it is: a bold and expansive vision of what God’s mercy can do, who is involved, and that it is not in some far off end of days, but happening now. Good news for many, but horrible news for some. The double-edge of the Jubilee.

I think there is this deep need for things to balance out in the end, especially when it comes to the things that have been stolen from us, for the ways we may have been cheated or betrayed, for all the ways that we have been hurt, the only path to healing we can imagine is for some kind of payback to take place, an eye for an eye, so to speak. Our justice systems have so many involved considerations in calculating what this looks like, according to legal tradition, certain crimes committed demand certain time served in prison or money paid. These calculations can be so fluid and situational, even biased.

I wonder if there is any amount of time served or money paid that can truly reckon with the catastrophes that take place at our hands. I reckon that our justice is often a surface maneuver to satisfy the crowds, to keep our governance stable, to keep the peace a bit longer. There is a deeper reckoning that calls out to us, though, a deeper healing, that is only made possible by a sheer act of love, an undeserved and uncalculated act of mercy, a jubilee.

Our ancient hymn is “Lord have mercy,” not “Lord have vengeance.” I recall how Christ forgave those who were killing him, while being killed. And that when he returned to his disciples, glorified but still scarred by that horrible death, his was not a mission of revenge, but he told them not to be afraid, he gave them his Spirit, and sent them on a mission of mercy, entreating them that if they retain the sins of any they are retained, and that if they forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. He was calling them to nothing less than a sustained Jubilee, not just when all of the Holy Land was their possession alone, not just every fifty years, but any time they chose. If they could be possessed by his Spirit, instead of their resentments, fears, bitterness, calculations, the year of the Lord’s favor would never end.

Jesus had a parable which featured the good and the bad, the wheat and the weeds, all mixed up in a field, such that it would be impossible to distinguish the wheat from the weeds, the good from the bad, they looked so similar. And even if you could pull out only the weeds, the roots would be so entangled that the wheat would be pulled out and killed with it, so much innocent collateral damage.

His parable showed that you had to leave that judgment to the harvest, in other words to God’s angels at the end of time, only then will it be clear, and any judgement, any vengeance, is practically impossible for us to succeed in the here and now.

And so it seems that our task, if we aim to be both good and not destructive, is to have patience, to not be a stumbling block for others, to give ultimate judgment to God, and not only that, to make room for God’s mercy and maybe even conversion to take place, even for those we reckon the worst. And, if we can’t bear that, if we can’t say yes, to at least get out of the way.

It seems to me that the Jubilee that Christ announced at his Nazareth sermon and at his Resurrection is still going on, this is a vital aspect of the Easter triumph, that that mercy is still manifesting, unfolding, and magnifying in countless directions, that the Jubilee trumpet is the same trumpet that the angels blew at the Resurrection, but in this case, they never stopped. That sound provides a sustained note and a sustaining energy for not just the Church, but for all of Creation, now vibrating with new resonance.

The only things we ultimately have are those things that we give to God, or give away in God's name. The only things we ultimately claim, are those things we give away. The closed palm can only hold a handful, and not for very long, but the open palm, the giving palm, holds all of Creation for all time. Our life is only a life if it becomes a gift.

It is my hope that the music of this Evensong will hearken back to the Jubilee trumpet, a kind of echo, revealing this resounding tone that promises to equip us to evermore forgive debts and forgive sins, delivering us from the bondage and prisons of our own design, so that God's Jubilee might be known in our time, that we might live Jubilee lives in the Lord's favor.