



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

July 11, 2021

The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministry*
on
Amos 7:7-15, Ephesians 1:3-14, and Mark 6:14-29
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The Voice of a Prophet

In our multimedia messaging world, it is not every day that something special comes in the post, or rather in the mail, a Save the Date or invitation to something quite unexpected like a palace, a castle, a party or a special event to something that might only exist in dreams, or magic kingdoms on the screen.

As a young child whenever my mum was using her sewing machine, I would take her sturdy, heavy, brown machine case on an imaginary journey to visit the Queen, whose distinctive voice we heard only last week), and I would go for tea at Buckingham Palace. I had no need of an invitation, and while this was pure fantasy it always gave me joy.

Imagine my delight, when this dream came true many years later as I experienced a –‘I can’t believe it’s happening occasion’- when a certain invitation to go to Buckingham Palace fell through our door. I was elated and while subsequently I will always remember not only the red carpet, the beautiful gardens, array of hats, and fascinators, the wonderful cucumber sandwiches, yes without their crusts, seeing the royal family up close, the most important thing was to be invited, to be greeted as a special guest into her palace, her home, with a warmth of welcome and attention.

Scripture is full of invitations, banquets, parties, palaces and gatherings of nobility of feasts and celebration. However, John the Baptist, our central character in our Gospel celebration today was far from welcome at this feast or in the lives of this royal family. Aside from his deemed notorious clothing and appearance, his voice, the one that had once ‘made straight the path’, was the same voice that had spoken out against the current relationships in the royal household. He’s was a voice that was despised in such a way that led not only to his imprisonment, but was one that would be ultimately silenced.

We know from John’s birth, his nativity, that we celebrated just a matter of weeks ago, that this unusual prophet was to mirror the lives of prophets of old, pointing to the future, and specifically

to the arrival of Christ Jesus. John was a forerunner, a distinctive voice and one which fascinated St. Augustine as 'a *finite* voice that spoke in the darkness to prepare the world for the *infinite* Word incarnate'. John too was a prophet that forthtold, giving voice to justice and urgently pointing out the ways of the world which are contrary to the ways of God. His life echoed the words of our Collect this morning, he knew what it was to live with 'grace and favor'. John's whole life encapsulated the role of a prophet as an agent of change, just as Amos too was an unwelcome prophet in his time who came with an adaptability and openness to the future, and a call to challenge the status quo.

While John the Baptist in this royal gospel setting was physically present in the palace, he remained the uninvited, unwelcome imposter who was thrown 'center stage' into Herod's birthday festivities, which swiftly turned from a time of celebration into one of horror and tragedy. I wonder why this upturned celebration gained so much attention by the gospel writers, Mark and also Matthew. To me his gruesome, violent, abhorrent scene is beyond uncomfortable. It is something I would certainly rather not hear or think about, and definitely not picture. However, it has been a compelling focus of artists around the world. The most striking for me being Caravaggio's huge masterpiece of 1608 which was commissioned by the Knights of Malta as an altarpiece in St. John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta, Malta where Caravaggio himself was inducted and briefly served as a knight. A powerful and disturbing image where 'death and human cruelty are laid bare, as its scale and shadow daunt and possess the mind', with its bold depiction of a type of scripture that 20th century writer Phyllis Tickle refers to as a troublesome text.

Troublesome not purely because of this witnessed execution, but the persistent occurrence of an abuse of power contained within the wider scene. An abuse of power seen in the enactment of blame, collusion, of finding a scapegoat in the guise of a dancing teenage daughter obedient, yet manipulated by her mother, and a father simply not wanting to lose face and who would rather put his conscience aside to honor his promise. Troublesome too, because we are led to believe there was no opposition to any of these motives or actions- rather a commitment to keep the peace and to silence.

I wonder what everyone thought of him, really thought of Herod, that he could dispense with life or even take life so lightly, as everyone went home that day. How would this horror have impacted on the lives of those who are forced to carry out this execution, or invited guests that watched and one would imagine felt uncomfortable but not enough to stand up and dare to speak up for justice, for what is right. Of all who witnessed an abrupt end to God's current voice in their midst, the one who was martyred before them and who in his life witnessed to what Paul had later written to the Ephesians, 'living in praise of God's Glory', and was too the voice that had 'trusted the word of truth'.

How far are such actions in this unwelcome scene removed from the call of the baptizer, and indeed our own Baptismal covenant in which we vow to respect the dignity of all human beings?

It's easy to judge all these characters, isn't it? Those whose silence condoned such trauma. I've been wondering what would we have done if we had been invited to this unwieldy celebration, to partake of this troublesome, oppressive scene, not only of execution but familial betrayal. And indeed, what do we do when we hear of oppression of our brothers and sisters persecuted even now all over the globe? Do we challenge violence or give voice to freedom from fear? Do we seek justice for all humanity regardless of belief, appearance or identity? Indeed, how do we give voice

and be the voice to our communal and personal stories of change of shame and struggle that been silenced, or perceived unwelcome? Or do we at times as Elizabeth Stanton says, hesitate to tell the truth that is in us?

In her weekly reflection on this week's readings, Bishop Mary Glasspool also asks How can we as a church be God's voice, Gods prophets today? She continues, 'God calls us, invites and welcomes as individuals and as the church, to the dynamic growth and fulfillment of life in the love and justice of God'.

A one-time popular international television program you may know, called *The Voice*, included a panel of judges who invited a range of singers to compete with one another. In the first round however they could only listen, and it was therefore only the impact, beauty, and power of the individual voices that qualified them for the next round, at which point judges welcomed the successful contestants and they met for the first-time face-to-face. Quite often in these moments people are surprised by what and who they saw.

So, one last thought, just as the voice of music often comes from expected people, God invites, welcomes, speaks to and surprises us in prophets around us. Just as John was an unexpected voice pointing to God in his time, where do we hear the voice of God today?