



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
in the City of New York  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**August 29, 2021**  
*The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*  
*on*  
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, James 1:17-27, and Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23  
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### **‘Be doers of the word.’**

I am sure that many of us were horrified at the awful scenes at the airport at Kabul, Afghanistan, in recent weeks and the senseless and cruel attack not just on US service personnel trying to protect innocent civilians, but by the attack on those same civilians – families desperate to flee and clutching their little children. Soon, we shall be in the month of November which is of all months, the month of remembering – with All Saints’ Day, All Souls’ Day, Veterans Day, and Remembrance Sunday. Now, thirteen more names will be added to the long list of those who have given their lives for the cause of peace. In acts of remembrance around the world, the words of the First World War poet, Laurence Binyon, will seem ever more poignant for families who continue to lose loved ones:

*“They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.”<sup>1</sup>*

Acts of remembering are a natural part of human life. Such rituals are ancient and we find them in the scriptures in different forms. They are also woven into the very fabric of Christian Liturgy.

Marty Haugen, the Church Musician, understands this and it helps us understand what we attempt to do here at Saint Thomas Church week by week. At a Lutheran conference some years ago he said,

*“We sing to remember who and whose we are. The leader of prayer, the one who reads, and especially the one who sings, must know more than the notes. She must know the stories of our faith as well as the stories of her own community, and she must know how they are brought together in worship.”*

‘She must know more than the notes.’

The bringing of the fruit of hours of musical rehearsal into the liturgy is very different to rehearsing a piece of music for performance on the stage. Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue is around the corner from Broadway, but what we do here Sunday by Sunday and day by day bears little resemblance to a Broadway Show and those who suggest it is, are missing the point. Yes, it is true, that the liturgical action is dramatic, for it involves words, symbolic action, light and shade, and amazing music – but it is not a performance. Our Choir School is unique not simply because of its size or even because it specializes in music-making

(after all, there are plenty of schools in this country that teach their students to make great music) our Choir School is unique because its *raison d'être* is to provide an essential element of the liturgical life of the church – *this* church. The choristers are not just students being given a musical education; they are being formed in a tradition that stretches back in time. They are not here to entertain us – they are *ministers*. And for that reason, Marty Haugen is right when he said – *'they must know more than the notes.'*

Music in the Christian tradition, therefore, is bound up with the telling of story and we have inherited this from our origins in the Jewish community where the saving works of God were celebrated in song in the Temple and in the Synagogue and most especially in the singing of the psalms. This is very different to the way that we tell our children stories at bedtime filled with princes and princesses, dragons, witches, and mythical creatures. Those fairy-stories are a far cry from the Judeo-Christian tradition of sacred story and song expressed ultimately through liturgical action. In the bible, the handing on of the tradition (first orally and then in written and liturgical form) is as much to do with being *part* of that story – if you will, *living* the tradition. As we heard in our Old Testament lesson today, *"Take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; **make them known to your children and your children's children.**"*

Jewish story-telling, therefore, has become an essential part of our own liturgical action and that is one of the ways that we, also, remember. And in our tradition, there is a New Testament Greek word for remembrance that is very important – and that is the word *anamnesis*.<sup>2</sup> St. Paul uses it in the first written account of the handing on of the tradition of the Lord's Supper:

*'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in **remembrance** of me."* (1 Corinthians 11:23)

That kind of remembering is different to the acts of remembrance we celebrate at our war memorials – like the names that are carved on the wall of this church or inscribed in our Book of Remembrance. This kind of remembrance is not a passive act but, in that same Jewish sense, a handing on of sacred story – of salvation history recalled in such a way that demands *participation* in it. Paul reminded the Corinthians that to participate in the Eucharistic meal was not a passive act by which they simply heard an old story re-told, rather it was an act of remembrance that allowed the community to become *part* of that story. St. Paul says, *"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."* (1 Corinthians 10:16-17)

Passing on tradition is, therefore, an essential part of our Christian formation. But, my friends, it also carries a danger; tradition is important but not as an end in itself. Tradition is a living thing and, although this may sound like a contradiction, tradition is open to change and development. Bishop Michael Marshall, old friend of this parish and of Nashotah House, used to delight in reminding Anglo-Catholics in particular that there was an important difference between tradition and *traditionalism*. He used to say, *"Tradition is the *living* faith of dead people; *traditionalism* is the *dead* faith of living people."* Think about that for a moment: *"Tradition is the *living* faith of dead people; *traditionalism* is the *dead* faith of living people."* And we all know how dangerous 'isms' are to communities.

In the Gospels, Jesus challenged what he saw as traditionalism, especially in the Scribes and the Pharisees, whose slavish attachment to the letter of the law did little to deepen the faith of others. We heard it in our Gospel reading today when the Pharisees and Scribes criticized Jesus for not following the tradition of the elders. (Mark also explains to those who are not Jewish how detailed this tradition of ritual cleansing had become by mentioning cups, pots, and bronze kettles). Jesus was quick to call them out on their hypocrisy by quoting the prophet Isaiah: *"This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."*

And he was equally quick to condemn that kind of hypocrisy – that kind of traditionalism - that was more concerned with outward show than conversion of the heart:

*“You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”*

As Michael Marshall puts it – “Tradition is the *living* faith of dead people; traditionalism is the *dead* faith of living people.”

And as a church community that is formed within the catholic but reformed tradition of Anglicanism, we, too, can fall into that danger; the words, symbols, the actions, the choir, even the building, can become a form of hypocrisy or even idolatry if they become separated from the story that they convey, but most especially if they do not make a difference to our attitudes and our actions; we do not go to church to learn how to be mean! At such times, we should recall how the Catholic revival in the Church of England that so affected the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion around the world, and affected this church, took root in that church because of its preferential option for the poor. The Anglo-Catholic revival first took root in the cities and in the slums of the nineteenth century – in poverty and social justice and not simply in the recovery of ritual observance at the altar or in the pew. As Frank Weston, the Archbishop of Zanzibar so famously said to the Anglo-Catholic Congress in London in 1923, *“I say to you, and I say it to you with all the earnestness that I have, that if you are prepared to fight for the right of adoring Jesus in his Blessed Sacrament, then you have got to come out from before your Tabernacle and walk, with Christ mystically present in you, out into the streets of this country, and find the same Jesus in the people of your cities and your villages. **You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle, if you do not pity Jesus in the slum.**”*<sup>3</sup>.

Or, if you want a simpler way of putting this, simply turn to our Epistle reading today – the Letter of James: *“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”*

There will be many today who will continue to question why NATO forces ever went into Afghanistan 20 years ago. I find it poignant that two of those killed last week were not even born when troops first went in. For them, we will hold our acts of remembrance and continue to teach our children to strive for the way of peace and tolerance, learning from the past in spite of others disseminating lies and hate. But as Christians, who inhabit a whole world of remembrance, we hold fast to the promise of Jesus who said these words to his frightened disciples just before his own betrayal and arrest: *“I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33)

<sup>1</sup> ‘For the Fallen’ by R. Laurence Binyon (1869-1943)

<sup>2</sup> *anamnesis* - ἀνάμνησις - is related to the Hebrew word *zeker* – זָכַר – and both relate to acts of memorial associated with salvation history, God’s presence, and ritual.

<sup>3</sup> You can find a transcription of Frank Weston’s famous speech on the Project Canterbury Website, here: <http://anglicanhistory.org/weston/weston2.html>

