



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

Sunday, October 3, 2021
The Feast of Dedication

Solemn Evensong and Te Deum
4pm

+

A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
1 Kings 8:54-62 and Hebrews 10:19-25
+

It's okay to provoke one another...

Writing in the introduction to his first book of published sermons in 1988, the eleventh Rector of Saint Thomas Church, Father John Andrew, describes falling in love with this church. He wrote, *"Most of the English cathedrals were known to me. But I was taken aback by this place, with all its splendor, its familiarity, as if it and I had known each other forever. The mutual recognition hit me with the force of a blow, and I knelt where I was. I got up knowing that life and my life were in some way to be shared. When I came out, I was secretly betrothed."* I find it poignant that he titled that book of sermons 'Nothing Cheap and Much that is Cheerful.'

Being brought to one's knees by the beauty of this Church is not uncommon. Just last week, at our parish meeting, Bruce Smith our Chief Advancement Officer talked movingly about the reaction of people coming into our building for the first time, particularly during the liturgy when he has acted as an usher at the back of the Church. He described the reaction of people who are often moved to tears and can do nothing except sit still for a while. And if you have been here during the day, with the lights dimmed and the candles at the shrines flickering, as your eyes grow accustomed to the darkness you will see dotted around the church people sitting still. Yes, in the city that never sleeps, this building is a gift, for it is an oasis of prayer that brings stillness on the busiest shopping street in the world. Those people have taken the courage to climb the thirteen steps and many of them arrive clutching their shopping bags with designer labels - for they came as tourists, but many leave as pilgrims.

If you do not know our parish history, this is the fourth iteration of a church dedicated to Saint Thomas which has seen two sites in Midtown Manhattan, moving here to the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street in 1870. We have not been very fortunate with buildings since two of them were destroyed by fire, which is possibly why the Vestry decided to build the fourth Church in stone. But what a church they commissioned! Our architects, Ralph Adams Cram and Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue created a Gothic masterpiece as authentic and sumptuous as any of the great Gothic churches of Europe. Nothing false here – stone upon stone, and a ribbed vault that bears its own weight because it has been built in the same way a 14th century cathedral of England or

France was built. So, this can never be described as ‘Gothic revival’- it is the ‘real thing’ in architectural terms. As John Andrew has famously said, *“Not neo-Gothic. Gothic. Mysteriously, the flame of Gothicism had leaped five centuries and four thousand miles, to burn gloriously on Fifth Avenue.”*

Listen to these words of Ralph Adam Cram, one of the architects of this church, written in 1914:

“Architecture was, as always, the beginning;
but it was far from being the end.
Stone carving came to florate shaft and cornice,
pinnacle, panel, and niche;
Sculpture to crowd every aperture with saints and angels;
Painting and gilding to make all burn with radiant fire;
Glass-making to pierce the opaque walls and
set there fields of apocalyptic glory;
Needlework to hang rich arras over cold stone, to clothe altars,
shrines, and priests in iridescent vestments;
Mosaic to sheet arch and vault in burnished gold
and azure and vermillion;
Metal work to fashion screens and candelabra of iron
and bronze and brass;
Joinery to raise wainscot of intricate tracery;
Goldsmithing to furnish shrines and reliquaries and sacred
vessels of precious metals and precious stones;
Poetry to create great hymns and canticles;
Drama to build up a supreme ritual;
Music to breathe the breath of divine life into all.”

In the second story of creation in the Book of Genesis, God creates Adam from the dust of the earth and then we read that God *“breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.”* (Genesis 2:8) The word for Adam and the word for dust from the ground are related in Hebrew – thus, the first human being and the first earth are related.

In a similar way, the creation of this building out of limestone is related to those of us who inhabit it. Just as the limestone was created hundreds of millions of years ago from the sediment in the great seas of the earth, so this church community is made up of many diverse people whose combined history creates an epic story of life and death, of struggle and joy, of hopes and fears, of a humanity consecrated to God the Creator.

In the First Letter of Peter, we read this invitation, *“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* (1 Peter 2:4-5)

Just as Adam and the ground are related, so the members of the Church are related in an intimate way with the building that they inhabit. As living stones, we become part of this structure bound together in the love of Jesus Christ who calls us into a new and living relationship with him and with one another.

In our first lesson, King Solomon in all his greatness, prayed for the people and humbled himself in the Temple that he had built by kneeling before the Lord and stretching out his hands towards the Holy of Holies. From that time, the people were forbidden from entering that sacred space and only the High Priest could enter that Holy of Holies, and only then on one day a year – on the Day of Atonement. But, as we heard in our second lesson today, Jesus has opened up that sanctuary as the great High Priest and sacrificial victim through his own self-offering on the Cross. *“We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus.”* So, if our identity as members of the Church which is Christ’s body is directly linked to this sanctuary that we have dedicated to the presence of God in our midst, then what kind of difference will that make to our lives? The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews makes it clear – *“let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.”*

Let us provoke one another to love and good deeds.

At the end of evensong, the Choir will sing the Song of the Church -the Te Deum – in which they will echo the song of all God’s faithful people throughout the ages and those who worship now in heaven, “We praise thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.” How significant that those words which will be brought to life through the breath of the choristers are also inscribed in deep carving on the front of the Church above the Rose window on Fifth Avenue, and on this great Reredos for we acclaim, *‘Thou art the King of Glory O Christ!’*

This Church stands as a witness to all that is beautiful and good; a witness to a God who never gives up on any of us; a witness to the kind of Beloved Community that Jesus came to build on earth. As living stones, let us rejoice at the dedication of this house of prayer for all peoples and provoke one another to love and good deed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.