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

Sunday, March 13, 2022
The Second Sunday in Lent

Solemn Evensong
4pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Susan Hill, *Associate Rector, Holy Apostles, New York City*
on
Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21; 9:4b-6; Acts 16:9-15
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Martyrs of Our Time: Elizabeth of Russia

"I am leaving a glittering world where I had a glittering position, but with all of you I am descending into a greater world – the world of the poor and the suffering."

This quote opens Grand Duchess Elizabeth's page on the Westminster Abbey website, describing her as one of the modern martyrs memorialized in stone at the west entrance of the Abbey.

If you were making a BBC series of the life of Grand Duchess Elizabeth, the beginning would indeed be captivating and glittering! Elizabeth was one of the grand-daughters of Queen Victoria, and she had quite an assortment of admirers and suitors – you could spend all of season one on a storyline of glittering balls and parties and courtship among the royals. Elizabeth seems to have turned down quite a few proposals before Grand Duke Sergei of Russia was lucky enough to capture her attention, and when he proposed for the second time (!), she said yes!

Season two of our imagined show – since of course it would be swiftly renewed for more episodes – would show Elizabeth's arrival in Russia, her wedding at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, and perhaps even her conversion from the Lutheran to the Russian Orthodox Church. It was said that everyone fell in love with her in Russia, and so our series could continue to show her glittering world. But then – cliffhanger! – Grand Duke Sergei was assassinated.

Perhaps then the series would take a much darker tone for the final season, and we would see what led to that assassination: against all the glitter of the Tsarist state, we would explore the repression of the commoners, and their talk of revolution. Deep in mourning for her husband, Elizabeth completely reoriented her life. She sold her extraordinary collection of jewels and possessions and used the proceeds to open the Convent of Saints Mary and Martha. As an abbess, Elizabeth and her sisters devoted themselves to a kind of diaconal ministry, caring for those who were suffering and poor in the slums of Moscow.

But when the Bolsheviks seized power and began persecuting the Church, Elizabeth and many others were arrested and sent to prison camps. In 1918, Elizabeth, several of her sisters, and members of the royal family, were executed in a mineshaft. Not the most uplifting ending for our TV series – but perhaps we will end instead with Elizabeth's canonization by the Russian Orthodox Church!
"I am leaving a glittering world where I had a glittering position, but with all of you I am descending into a greater world – the world of the poor and the suffering."

What inspired Elizabeth to make such a radical shift in her life? To give up her glittering world with its sparkling jewels and luxurious surroundings, and instead to go out into what she called the "greater world" – the world where the vast majority of human beings lived. How did she find the wisdom to make such a change? Where is such wisdom to be found?

Well, Wisdom herself tells us in our first reading from the Book of Proverbs. There we find Woman Wisdom, and she isn't just speaking to us, she is crying out! On top of high places, in the middle of the crossroads, beside the gates of the towns and cities. Wisdom isn't hidden away in a dusty locked room or enshrined in a temple or luxuriating in a palace – she is out among the people, she is in the greater world.

Proverbs tells us that Woman Wisdom was present at the creation of all that we know. The state of being wise, of understanding what is right, and, just as importantly, *acting* upon this understanding, is an integral part of God's creation of us. We were created to seek and embrace Wisdom, to learn what it means to be wise, and live more abundantly with Wisdom's insight.

So - how do we do that? Here Wisdom offers us an invitation – to eat of her bread and drink of her wine, to turn away from foolishness, and live! We find the very Wisdom of God all around us, in food and drink and the basic necessities of life. And we might notice where we do not find Wisdom. Not only is she not hidden away but instead is out in the greater world, she is also not found in glittering jewels and the luxurious possessions of high society. In fact, she says that the fruit she has to offer is better than gold and silver, than anything in the treasuries. Rather, Wisdom is found in the everyday: the bread and wine and other essentials that sustain us and give us abundant life. And further, just as she is always offering us her hospitality through these basics of life, she also invites us to gain in God's Wisdom when we generously offer these essentials to others who need them.

Lydia, in our reading from Acts of the Apostles, does just that. She didn't live quite as glittering a life as Elizabeth, but we learn that she is a "seller of purple," or in other words, a merchant of cloth that only the wealthy could afford. Lydia was clearly a woman with some power and social status. The apostle Paul encounters her on the fringes of the city, though – not a place where the wealthy would generally gather – and she was with a group dedicating themselves to prayer. Perhaps that's when Wisdom offered Lydia what she needed most for abundant life – the nourishment of Paul's preaching of the good news of Christ. Being fed in that way encouraged Lydia to open her home to Paul and his companions, offering these strangers the generous hospitality of bread and wine and the other basics of life.

Grand Duchess Elizabeth too found Wisdom as she used the proceeds from the stuff of her glittering life to fund a ministry devoted to offering hospitality to the people in Moscow who needed it desperately. The nourishment that Woman Wisdom offered her was exactly what she needed most, a new purpose for her life: turning around and offering the essentials of life concretely and generously to so many people in need.

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Not all of us have been living a glittering life, though compared to most of the greater world many of us are very comfortable. And perhaps the last few years of pandemic, societal unrest, and now the horror of war being grievously waged by Elizabeth's beloved Russia might be serving to push us, as the assassination of Elizabeth's husband pushed her, to seek a change. How will Wisdom guide us now? Toward continuing to serve primarily our own ends? Or offering to others the hospitality that she is always offering us?

Jesus himself made the choice clear – as the very embodiment of God's Wisdom, he feeds us with his very being, enlightening us through the transformation of the basic elements of bread and wine. And as he offers

hospitality, nourishment, and healing to all in the greater world, he invites us to follow him and do the same – choosing to forsake all foolishness, living in the greater world, and offering hospitality to those in need.

As you might know, I serve at Church of the Holy Apostles in Chelsea, which offers one of the largest emergency feeding programs in the country. St. Thomas has been a generous supporter of our ministry, and through your generosity and the generosity of so many others, we were able to respond to the shock of the pandemic and the attendant economic crisis to radically increase our capacity to serve our guests, from providing 344,000 meals in 2019, to 1.2 million meals in 2020, and about 2.1 million meals in 2021!

And it's not just the basic essentials of food that the Soup Kitchen offers, but many other necessities, such as referrals to other social service agencies, help in getting a new ID, haircuts, winter coats – and perhaps one of the biggest essentials: being treated as an honored guest. One of our former guests, Chris, was just telling me the other day that being a guest at the Soup Kitchen helped him to find stability in his life, and he now is proud to be a volunteer himself, offering that hospitality generously to others!

This is an essential aspect of the Wisdom of God – the wisdom Elizabeth found in leaving her glittering life and entering the greater world and offering hospitality to those she found there. The wisdom that Lydia found in the preaching of the good news that inspired her to offer hospitality to Paul and his friends. The wisdom that Chris found as well, even though he was far from the glittering world of Elizabeth or the well-off world of Lydia – he too is finding wisdom in offering hospitality to others.

How are you being called by Wisdom, by Christ, to offer hospitality yourself? How might you forsake foolishness, offering essentials to those in need instead? Let us each eat of Wisdom's bread and drink of her wine, and offer nourishment to others as well, living in the greater world, and walking joyfully in the way of understanding!
Amen.