

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 29, 2022

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

on

John 17:20-26

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‘Leave us not comfortless’

Ellie Garcia, a fourth grader aged 9, was one of the 19 children who died in her school classroom in Uvalde last Tuesday. Her grandfather waited outside the school with the other parents while it was in lockdown. When he was called inside by the police, he said that knew that meant she was already dead. A reporter for a local newspaper interviewed them. They described a beautiful little girl – the second eldest of five sisters who loved to help her grandparents around the house. She adored the animated Disney film ‘Encanto.’ She was a cheerleader, and loved basketball. She dreamed of wearing a purple dress to her quinceañera, they said, and becoming a teacher. Ellie’s grandmother, Nelda, works as a cook at another Uvalde elementary school that was also placed on lockdown after the shooting. Nelda knew both of the teachers who were killed. Sitting in her kitchen on Wednesday, surrounded by loved ones, she said the deaths still didn’t seem real:

“This morning I got up and thought, ‘What a dream I had,’” she said.

She had been stockpiling gifts for Ellie’s birthday on June 4: leggings and Legos. Ellie’s father planned to handle the music — lots of cumbias, which Ellie liked to dance to at her grandparents’ house, filming TikTok videos, she said.

She then had to explain the shooting to Ellie’s 5-year-old sister, who saw her parents on television late Tuesday:

“Why are they at the civic center?” she asked.

“They’re looking for Ellie,” Nelda said.

“Why?” the girl asked.

“They lost her at the school,” Nelda said.

“Why?”

“Because she died.”

Then she put the little girl to bed.

By morning, Nelda said her granddaughter had stopped asking questions.

There is nothing I can say today that will make sense of Ellie’s death, or the other 18 children who died with her, or the teachers, or the shoppers in the supermarket in Buffalo, or for that matters any of the 213 mass shootings in our country this year, of which 27 of them were in schools. All Ellie’s family have now, together with the families of children who have died needlessly and tragically, are memories of them playing, and laughing, and looking forward to their summer recess. The boy choristers are absent from our service today because of a long week recording two CD’s; we decided to let them have the Memorial Day weekend with their families. But their absence also reminds me that it could have happened here, and the terrible weight

of responsibility that Mr. Seeley has, and which he shares with the faculty, the Board of Trustees, and the Vestry of our Church.

27 school shootings this year. It does not make sense.

The Bishop of West Texas has also felt helpless, like those families, and has asked us to pray. Prayer may also seem hollow; it will not bring the children back, but it unites us in the love of Jesus Christ who came to confront evil. Our collect, today, has a line that resonates with many of us here in this church, and especially with the families of those who are grieving the taking of innocent lives:

“Do not leave us comfortless.”

Ellie’s grandmother ended her interview with the words “It’s very, very sad.” At the moment, her prayer, and our prayer is united: “Do not leave us comfortless.”

No doubt people will be mobilized; students and teachers will demand change; the President and former Presidents will speak out; people will demonstrate; but already we hear of blame and excuses, and even explanations when what is required for the families who have not yet buried their children is *silence*. So, sadly, many of us do not expect anything to change. Instead, positions will become entrenched across the political divide and, eventually, the names of the little children will be forgotten.

On Thursday, Ascension Day, a parishioner asked me what I, as a recent immigrant to this country, made of it all. He said that he would like to hear me talk about how it affected me as his priest and pastor from the pulpit. Well, Bill, I have been involved in schools as a governor and a priest since I was first ordained in 1985; I am a father; I am a grandfather to three children; I have been married to a teacher for 32 years. How do I feel? Sick, helpless, angry, and perplexed all mixed up. And I wondered, as I prayed the collect today, if God would indeed answer that plea, ‘do not leave us comfortless.’ And I guess if we were to ask this congregation here in church and on-line the same question, we would get a very mixed bag of feelings. Can we, therefore, pray the collect together? Do not leave us comfortless, **but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us**. To strengthen those who are grieving and strengthen the resolve of those who want to find a way to change things.

The fact remains that, after the Hungerford massacre in my home country in 1987, when one man killed sixteen people, the political parties united and changed the law the very next year to ban access to all semiautomatic weapons like the ones that he had used. Then, after the worst mass shooting in British history in Dunblane, Scotland, in 1996, when sixteen elementary school children and their teacher were shot dead and fifteen others injured, the Conservative Government followed by the Labor Government outlawed the possession of *all* hand guns. My home country now has one of the lowest gun-related death rates in the developed world. So, yes, I feel sick, helpless, angry, and perplexed all mixed up. I guess it’s simplistic to say remove the weapons and you radically reduce the chance for mass shootings, but it is a logical conclusion! Britain is not the only country to have done something to legislate against gun crime - Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway – all of those countries have also reduced the possibility of mass murder by reducing access to weapons. Even though the right to bear arms in the Constitution is interpreted as the right for all Americans to own a weapon, and we are told that arming good people will protect us from bad people, it still took the good armed police a very long time to deal with the situation in Uvalde. Now, please don’t get me wrong, I am not naïve. No amount of gun-control will stop evil people perpetrating evil deeds; even if we did away with weapons entirely, evil people would still find ways to harm others. We would still need to keep praying, “leave us not comfortless.”

As an immigrant, what I am particularly perplexed with is the fact that there is resistance even to background checks, or keeping a registry, or limiting the kinds of weapons available. Let me try to explain. Once, when I was visiting Chicago some years ago on a visit to this country, I was driving a very nice rental car and found

myself driving through a very disreputable neighborhood. A police patrol car was hiding in a side street and followed me. I was pulled over and asked for my documents – my license and my insurance. Satisfied, they sent me on my way with a smile. As they checked, I could not fail but see the handgun in its holster (that is something we simply don't have in Britain still to this day) but that incident has been in my mind. How is it that, to drive a car, I need to have a license. And in order to have a license, I have to take a test, and not one test but *two* tests - a written test *and* a practical test, after many hours of driving lessons. To *own* the car I want to drive, I also need to have the car insured. Why? Because there could be an accident, and I might hurt someone or, worse, kill someone.

A few days after his 18th birthday, just over a week ago, Salvador Ramos walked into a store and, over the counter, bought two semi-automatic assault rifles and 375 rounds of ammunition, pictures of which he then posted on social media. A few days later he went on the rampage in an elementary school that had just that morning celebrated an honor roll ceremony.

So, Bill, a rather long answer to your question. I guess all I can say is “It does not make sense to me.” If driving a car requires such stringent safeguards, why not owning a gun?

Today's Gospel reading is a part of what we affectionately call ‘The High Priestly Prayer’ of Jesus. This prayer, the whole of Chapter 17 of St. John's Gospel, we would do well to read and re-read this week in the aftermath of this latest atrocity of mass murder. It is poignant because the prayer comes after Judas had left the upper room to betray Jesus. It is powerful because Jesus prays directly to his Father for his disciples and for you and for me (*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word*). It is challenging because Jesus asks his heavenly Father specifically *not* to remove them and us from the world. In other words, Jesus prays for his followers precisely because he knows that they cannot escape from the world with all its complexities, sin, prejudice, corruption, violence, and evil. In other words, belonging to the mystical body of Christ – to the Church – is not an escape route from the world. The church is called, as the Body of Christ, to engage *with* the world. For a little while, when we come to mass here at Saint Thomas, this building, this beautiful music, will uplift us. The same will be true of the grieving families in Uvalde who are attending mass today. Perhaps it will be a small comfort to us as it will be to them. But at the end of the mass, they and we are sent out *into* the world. Just as our liturgy happens *in* the world, so our Christian calling is to bear witness *to* the world that there is another way. And it is the way of Jesus; the way of love. Not sentimental love that the world encourages with its dramatic gestures, but self-sacrificial love that can make a difference to those whom we meet.

On this Memorial Day Weekend, we think of our war dead; we think of the poor people of Ukraine; we think of the little children and we feel shocked at the needless slaughter of innocent lives. On our Reredos there are three angels towards the top in the idle, those angels are swaddling the Holy Innocents murdered by King Herod; we pray that those holy innocents of Uvalde may also be scooped up by the angels and taken to Jesus.

In his prayer, Jesus prays that he might share his glory with his followers – but it is not the kind of glory that the world understands. The glory that Jesus shares is union with the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit that will make us one, make us whole, and comfort us in times of distress. But more than that, it will empower us to call for change. Like many churches, our congregation has people with very different political views. What unites us is our baptismal covenant that requires us to resist evil and confront injustice, respecting the dignity of all human beings.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Let us pray.

O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*