

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 26, 2023

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*

on

John 11:1-45

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“Unbind him, and let him go.”

The Greek translated in King James Version as Jesus ‘groaning in the spirit’ ¹ is extraordinary, for the first word has its roots in the *snorting noise* made by a horse. This very strong word is connected with a sense of indignation experienced deep within Jesus – in his very soul. To emphasize it, the author of the Fourth Gospel repeats the phrase when Jesus arrives at the tomb of Lazarus. We already know that Jesus was deeply disturbed and affected by the crowd’s lamentation and, because his emotions overtake him, “Jesus wept” says John. Many modern translations struggle to find appropriate words, but the New Living Testament translation uses this remarkable phrase – “*a deep anger welled up within him.*” Not only does this emotion well up deep from within Jesus, it affects him physically too. In King James Version the Greek word is translated as ‘troubled’ which is probably a much better description than the ‘deeply moved’ favored by other translations. This is not Jesus feeling sad; this is not Jesus feeling sorry for his friends; you must get that out of your minds. This is the opposite of the ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’ who is kind to children and animals; this is an angry and almost out of control Jesus.

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus is moved with compassion at the plight of the sick, or the crowds, or the disabled. Again, we so often think of compassion as a kind and gentle word, synonymous with empathy. But it is far from that, for the root of that particular word in Greek is the *intestines* or the gut. ² In Hebrew, the word for compassion has an even stranger root - the *womb of God*. ³ So, when Jesus is moved with compassion, we are saying that Jesus feels the state of the universe and its suffering *in himself*. It is as if his insides are turned upside down – that feeling that all of us have when we are churned up with emotion, anger, guilt, grief, sadness or fear.

The great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen described compassion with this incredible image: “*Compassion is such a deep, central and powerful emotion in Jesus that it can only be described as a movement of the womb of God. There, all the divine tenderness and gentleness lies hidden...When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God’s immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself.*” ⁴

The source of all life trembled.

Now you realize that the raising of Lazarus is far from just a miracle for, after all, it was simply the resuscitation of a corpse. Dramatic, because the corpse was already decomposing – “*Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days,*” says the ever-practical Martha. Again, King James Version does not beat about the bush – “*he stinketh!*” Lazarus is resuscitated – although this has often been seen as pre-figuring the Resurrection of Jesus, this is not like the Resurrection of Jesus, for Lazarus remains mortal and will have to die again. Indeed, in the very next chapter we hear of a plot to kill not only Jesus but Lazarus as well! As Jesus himself told his disciples, the death of Lazarus would lead to his glorification. As he asked for the

tomb to be opened, he turned to Martha and said, “*Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*” Glory is a powerful word in John’s Gospel. As Michael Ramsey put it, “*Glory is the one of the great words of Christian vocabulary. It means here the self giving love seen in Jesus, the very opposite of the human glory of self-esteem or the esteem of men.*”⁵ Glory as self-giving love, a love that moved Jesus so much that the womb of God trembled in Jesus in his body, mind, and spirit. It is almost as if Jesus was indignant at the state of human degradation and what humanity had become. ‘He stinketh.’

When Jesus began his ministry, he went to his home town of Nazareth, and read from the Prophecy of Isaiah: “*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” (Luke 4: 18b-19)

What we see in the raising of Lazarus is Jesus putting into practice his calling to release captives and let the oppressed go free. By reversing the effects of natural death, Jesus dramatically revealed the glory that would change everything. ‘The Year of the Lord’s Favor’ is the Year of *Jubilee* of the Book of Leviticus⁶ – the year that comes after seven cycles of the so-called Sabbatical years – seven times seven years – a radical celebration planned in the Torah to be held every fifty years to remind God’s chosen people that the land was entrusted to them but actually belonged to God; so that land-ownership would be forfeited; a year when debts would be cancelled; a year when slaves would be set free. Sadly, there is no mention of that Year of Jubilee every having been celebrated in the Old Testament. So, it is significant that Jesus says that the Year of Jubilee will be fulfilled in his very person.

“Unbind him,” said Jesus, and that ministry of release for captives, of recovery of sight for the blind, of letting the oppressed go free, of proclaiming the Year of Jubilee begins for the very first time, revealing the glory of God that can make all things new – even a rotting corpse.

Yesterday was the United Nations *International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. The day honors and remembers those who suffered and died as a consequence of the transatlantic slave trade, which has been called “the worst violation of human rights in history,” in which over 400 years more than 15 million men, women, and children were the victims. Over the past few years, our Diocese has been exploring the story of our founding and our involvement in that slave trade, and our benefiting from the wealth of those who were involved in human trafficking and the selling of human beings as if they were a commodity. In our Cathedral, our Bishop led a service of apology, and we will be joining with the rest of the Diocese in using some of the words of that service in our special prayers today. The dehumanizing effect of the slave trade must never be forgotten. I learned about it as a child in my history and religious studies lessons even though slavery was abolished in 1833 in Britain. And lest some of you think I should not be talking about the legacy of slavery from this pulpit, remember that it was my British forebears that first trafficked Africans to these shores and to the Caribbean as slave labor. Remembering is important, and our shared histories contain moments of incredible humanitarian resolve but also, sadly, malevolent behavior.

We cannot change the lives of those millions who were enslaved so long ago, but we can acknowledge the legacy of that level of human trafficking and the dehumanizing effects that hundreds of years has had on people whose difference from others is simply a different skin pigmentation; if you will, that kind of atrocity over such a period of time hard-wires racist feelings in the brains of so many – it makes it seem almost normal. But an **apology** is only worth something if it is accompanied by a change of heart, otherwise it is just words. Equally, wallowing in self-pity is hardly helpful. Since I seem fixated with New Testament Greek words today, let’s throw in the New Testament word for repentance which means literally, *turning around*.

The Day of Remembrance is also, significantly, the Feast of the Annunciation, when we think of Mary’s meeting with the Angel Gabriel and the conception of Jesus in her womb – Jesus whose very name means that he would save his people from their sins. How did he do this? St. Paul tells us in his Letter to the

Philippians: *“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...”* (Philippians 2: 5-7a)

Did you hear that? He emptied himself, **taking the form of a slave.**

When Jesus approached the grave of Lazarus, he was already agitated and disturbed in his spirit. He was angry in his spirit, almost snorting with rage, and perhaps this helps us understand how he was to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, and how he has now entrusted that to you and to me; to proclaim liberty to captives; to let the oppressed go free; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

On the cross, Jesus opened his arms of love for all of humanity; on the cross, Jesus cried with a loud voice because of the estrangement of the human race from the Creator; on the cross Jesus carried the burden of all the sins of all time and the sins that were still to come; as he continually pleads for us at the right hand of the Father, his wounds are forever fresh with the abiding sins of humanity. But, my friends, it is the eternal freshness of the wounds of love on the glorified body of Jesus that are our hope. When Jesus died on the cross, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God's immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself. The earth responded and trembled in an earthquake; the Temple, the sign of God's presence trembled as the veil of the Temple was torn in two.

March 24 is the date of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero as he said mass in a hospital chapel. He was martyred at the altar for speaking out for freedom and liberty; he was attempting to proclaim the Year of the Lord's Favor. On this very day, 45 years ago, Oscar Romero said this:

*“The church cannot be deaf or mute before the entreaty of millions of persons who cry out for liberation, persons oppressed by a thousand slaveries. But the church tells them what is the true liberty they must seek: the freedom that Christ began on earth when he rose and burst the chains of sin, of death, and of hell. It is to be like Christ, free of sin, to be truly free, with true liberation. Those who put their faith in the Risen One and work for a world more just, who protest against the injustices of the present system, against the abuses of unjust authorities, against the wrongfulness of humans exploiting humans; all those who begin their struggle with the resurrection of the great Liberator – they alone are authentic Christians.”*⁷

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble... ⁸

¹. ἐμβριμάομαι τῷ πνεύματι

². ἐσπλαγχνίσθη

³. ׀׀׀

⁴. From: ‘Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life’ – Henri J. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison

⁵. Introducing the Christian Faith p.46 – A.M. Ramsey

⁶. Leviticus 25:1-13

⁷. Sermon preached on March 26, 1978

⁸. African American Spiritual