SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, March 12, 2023
The Third Sunday in Lent

Solemn Evensong
4 p.m.

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A Sermon by
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Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen. In Ancient Greek, the word our English Bible translate as meek is prowess, which is easy to remember because plows rhymes with mouse.

And I there's the rub for today's English speaking Christians when it comes to the third Beatitude in Jesus Sermon on the Mount, our modern culture finds nothing in meekness to commend it as a defining character trait. A meek person is assumed to be a doormat.

A tiny, frightened, cringing creature docile in the face of intimidation or injury. It's difficult to imagine new parents hoping their baby will one day grow up to be meek. Meekness doesn't feature in any 21st Century success story. I've heard the mighty, the rich and the famous don't get where they are by being meek.

This was not always the case, however. As the Oxford English Dictionary makes clear from the Bible's earliest English translation. Up until fairly recently, the word meek had far more favorable connotations, such as gentleness. Humility, kindness and civility. Such virtues attached not to the weak and insignificant, but rather to people in power who choose to give up their authority and privilege in order to learn from those who don't have any. In so doing. They become servant leaders. Change makers whose influence in the world is born not of muscle, but of compassion. Curiosity. And self-control. In Matthew's gospel, the word prowess appears three times.

First here in Jesus brief, an astonishing teaching about the nature of those blessed by God right now, who will one day be entrusted by God with the whole wide world. Then in Matthew 11, Jesus invites all those who labor and are heavy laden to come unto Him.

Take my yoke upon you, he says, and learn from me. For I am proud and lowly in hearts and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Finally, in Matthew 21, Jesus rides a donkey through the gates of Jerusalem on his way to the cross to fulfill what the Prophet Zachariah spoke. Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you. PROWSE And mounted on a donkey. In the person of Jesus. The promise of God is and is coming. All of it happening in the here and now.

All of it rooted in this notion of prowess, divine and ultimate power intentionally set aside in obedience to God for the good of others. And for the good of the world. A wise person once said that if you want to know what it's like to have one foot planted firmly on Earth and the other in the Kingdomof Heaven, pay close attention to the Sermon on the Mount. Now, if you are looking for a few more, thou shalt not to brandish before sinners or key code for easy access to the sweet hereafter, or just a plain old rejection of the Old Testament in favor of the new.

You won't find that here. Instead, you will encounter what can feel like a freight train of Jesus teachings that begin with the Beatitudes and just picks up steam. Here. Jesus. Teaching is dense and mystical, yet also practical. He takes what is written on Moses famous stone tablets and speaks them into new life with fresh interpretation that listeners find awesome or awful depending on where they sit. Awesome or awful because Jesus clearly states not how you and I are supposed to behave so we can get it right with God, but rather just who it is God is already using to change the world.

To bring the kingdom of heaven near. And they are not the kind of people we'd expect. They are old ladies and outcasts. The convict. The contagious beggars and blind men. The refugee. The youngest son. The teenage girl. When it comes to God and the Kingdom of God says Jesus, open your mind because the heavenly right side up is humanity's upside down. And we find vivid examples of this topsy turvy kingdom way in our readings this afternoon in the 11th chapter of Isaiah. Israel is promised a glorious future and a leader to match one who is powerhouse rooted in the royal line and the best of Israel's tradition rising from it to summon the new Jerusalem and reorder it in righteousness and peace. In this new order, fierce predators snuggle with their prey. Enemies are friends. And a little child is in charge of it all. In Matthew 18. Jesus brings such a child right into the midst of a bunch of adults asking big questions about power and status in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus places before them, one with no status and no power, and says, Imagine yourself choosing to set aside your own authority and privilege to become as vulnerable and dependent as this child. That's what greatness looks like in God's kingdom.

Just two weeks ago, I witnessed firsthand something of Jesus third beatitude teaching. I was on pilgrimage with 27 New York teens to an ecumenical monastery in the remote French countryside. A community called Tse Tasa was founded in the 1940s by a young Swiss theologian named Roger to be a monastic community of reconciliation during the Second World War. It soon became a haven for war refugees and a sanctuary for orphans and the poor. Not long after the war, the brothers noticed that more and more young people were making their way to TSA Protestants and Roman Catholic visitors alike.

By the early sixties, so many youth were making pilgrimages to Casey that the community had to expand. Now, Brother Roger never intended to build something that would draw young people from around the world to pray and learn and work.

In fact, early on, he felt it was a distraction from his desire to follow Jesus and live the Gospel in a modest church and a small community of brothers. But he received a vision of TSA as an arc filled with voyagers and pilgrims with a mission of the Brotherhood to provide hospitality while striving for Christ's vision of peace and reconciliation. 80 years later, tens of thousands of young people arrive at TSA each year. They worship and they work. And they play in an intentional community, grounded and fully conscious of worldly systems of wealth and power, and serenely unapologetic about its choice of a different master.

Now. I've been chaperoning high schoolers to TSA for as long as I've been ordained. Teenagers are already in their own place of in-between with one foot in childhood, the other testing out life as an adult. They are eager to be taken seriously, yet already missing the simpler freedoms of youthful play.Every year I marvel at what happens when our group meets the brothers of TSA, men who willingly set aside every privilege of aspiration and possession most valued by our culture in order to be like them. Dependent. Powerless. Incomplete.

Prowse. This year, one of our pilgrims, a 14 year old girl, really took one of the brothers to task. She'd grown up in the Pentecostal tradition and was clearly both troubled and excited by what she was hearing about Jesus and his radical forgiveness and inclusive, transforming love.I had noticed her writing furiously in her notebook during Bible study in church. She'd already cornered me after Ash Wednesday and quizzed me

about sin. Now we had gathered with our group to meet with an American brother, brother John Marie.He'd grown up in Queens. His family lived in Jersey, and he had been a TSA brother for 40 years. And our kids took turns asking questions about faith and prayer and children in church, about learning French and not getting married, and whether he misses New York.

Meanwhile, the arm of that 14 year old girl kept shooting into the air. She grilled John Murray about sin and regret, hell and blind belief. What if you end up in hell? She said. Do you believe in the afterlife?

And the more animated she grew, the calmer brother John Murray got. And I could tell the other kids were getting nervous, but also a little bit thrilled. Finally, she tipped up her chin and asked him, point blank, Do you think you'll be rewarded more for living a life for God?

Oh, he said, without the slightest pause. I hope God isn't like that. And the air got really still. And I flashed forward to the world these children would inherit. Might God be stirring in their hearts a willingness to set aside what the world tells them matters most to become Proust's change makers.

Builders of the New Jerusalem. Blessed are the meek. Four. They shall inherit the earth. In the words of Brother Roger of TSA, let us pray. Jesus, our hope make us into humble people of the Gospel. We would so much like to understand that the best in us is built up by a very simple trust.Even a child can manage it.