

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, June 18, 2023

The Third Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Exodus 19:2-8a; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

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Tradition or Traditionalism? - Putting out into the Deep Water

Speaking to an international missionary society, as Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams said this about mission:

*"God's mission and ours...is exactly what it's always been. There's absolutely nothing new to say here because it's already been said in scripture. God's mission first."*¹

God's mission first.

In Matthew's Gospel, we have to wait ten chapters before the disciples are sent out on a missionary journey. The first third of the Gospel narrative is all about Jesus and his own ministry in Galilee. Early in the Gospel, Jesus called the Twelve and they accompanied him, watching his signs and miracles, hearing his teaching and, in particular, being formed by him through his teaching in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. This is significant for us as we think about our own understanding of mission; of what it is we are trying to share. The Disciples were not sent out for some time – they needed to, quite literally, sit at the Master's feet in order to be equipped for mission. They needed to know Jesus and *his* mission before they could join in that proclamation.

In our reading from Exodus, we have an echo of the meeting of Moses alone with God on the Mountain when he called him. Now, after the great Exodus, and in this period of transition between Egypt and entering the Promised Land, Moses no longer stands alone before God; the people stand with him and it is God who takes the initiative again: *"If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples...you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation."*

God formed the Tribes into a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, to reflect his glory and to show forth his glory to the world. The Church, as the priestly people of God – the Body of Christ – is similarly called to reveal God's glory in the world; to proclaim God's presence in the world and the breaking in of the Kingdom. Rowan Williams went on to say, *"We are here because God has moved towards us, into our midst, and drawn us into his own movement of love...That's God's mission and all that we ever do is to reflect its movement, and be carried along in the slipstream of God's movement into the world, gathering the world back to himself."*

What does that mean for us here in New York? How do we get caught up in the slipstream of God's movement into the world? Well, I guess the first thing is to recognize that everything we do here as a community of faith must be done looking *out* rather than within. It is true that our worship is a glimpse of heaven, but the mission of the church is not to be a kind of comforter under which we snuggle up to avoid

the difficult choices that face us when we exit the Fifth Avenue doors. The danger for all the main-stream churches is retreating into ourselves and forget that people will only come if we invite them, and offer them something they need. People will only come if they see that our *faith* is as alive as our liturgy and music; active and struggling with the false gods of our current society. As Archbishop William Temple famously said, ***“The Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it.”***

Bishop Michael Marshall, the great Anglo-Catholic bishop-missionary and old friend of our church, loved to quote the words of Professor Jaroslav Pelikan. In particular, he used to remind his Anglo-Catholic friends that if they were only concerned with the externals, with the ceremonial, and with the way things had always been done, that their faith risked withering. Pelikan famously said, *“Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition.”*²

Imagine when Jesus sent the Twelve out if Peter had said, “Oh! Sorry Jesus, we have never done that before!” Isn’t that the reaction Jesus received from the priest and scribes? Let me give you another example. Do you remember when Jesus first called Simon Peter in Luke’s Gospel? Peter and the other fishermen had fished unsuccessfully all night. Early in the morning, tired, they were washing their nets and sorting them. Jesus commandeered Peter’s boat so that he could teach the people from the water. Imagine how perplexed, maybe even annoyed those fishermen felt when this rabbi-guy then decided that he wanted to go fishing himself! What does a carpenter from Nazareth know about fishing! The important part of the story is what Jesus says next – *“Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”* Peter protests that they had been fishing all night to no avail, but Peter does. To humor him? To teach him a lesson? Or was he beginning to sense a call? The resulting catch of fish was so great that even with the help of other boats and partners, the boats began to sink with the weight of the fish! [see Luke 5:1-11].

Putting out into the deep water is necessary in order for the mission of the Church to flourish. Putting out into deep water means risking danger and avoiding the easy way. Remember also the tradition of Peter leaving Rome during the persecution of Nero. On the Appian Way he met Jesus walking into Rome and Peter said to him, *“Quo vadis, Domine?”* (Where are you going, Lord?). To which Jesus replied *“To Rome, to be crucified again.”* Peter turned around.

When Jesus sent the disciples out on their first mission, he sent them with very little – they were to travel light. **He** was the source of their mission, and they were to replicate his own ministry in the world: *“Proclaim the good news, The kingdom of heaven has come near.”*

At the heart of our own mission statement are these words: ‘To worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ.’ Worship is not sufficient on its own, and loving and serving means putting out into deep water, nourished by that worship, but recognizing that tradition is a living thing and a means to something far greater. Quo vadis, Domine? Writing to the Romans, Paul puts it so succinctly: *“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”*

As Rowan Williams so rightly said, all that we need to do is to reflect the movement of **God’s mission**, not our own, and be carried along in the slipstream of **God’s movement** into the world, gathering the world back to the Creator of all.

¹ Rowan Williams speaking to a meeting of the Intercontinental Church Society at Lambeth Palace in 2009.

² Carey, Joseph (June 26, 1989). "Christianity as an Enfolding Circle [Conversation with Jaroslav Pelikan]". *U.S. News & World Report*. Vol. 106, no. 25. p. 57.