

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 22, 2023

The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Isaiah 45:1-7; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22

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The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This morning, I was reading about a young man called Awad Darawshe, aged 23, a Palestinian-Israeli paramedic who worked for Yossi Ambulances. He was attending the music festival that was attacked by Hamas gunmen. He did not flee, choosing instead to stay and tend the wounded and the dying. He was shot himself and died at the scene. I was taken by words written about him in the New York Times this morning: *“A young Palestinian-Israeli Citizen committed to peace and killed by Islamist Hamas terrorists in the Jewish homeland, Awad Darawshe may appear to be an apt symbol of the utter defeat of the bridge-builders still committed to a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”*¹

Or was he?

Throughout history, those on the extremes have cultivated mistrust in those on the other side, sometimes even supporting one another in unholy alliances, in order to prevent any kind of compromise. Mistrust simply fuels a cycle of violence. We see it, today, in our Gospel reading. The irony should not be lost on us; this happened 2000 years ago and in the very same land, this time occupied by the Roman Empire. The Pharisees were extreme and fanatic followers of the law and despised all who could not follow their practice of religion. The Herodians were a political group committed to appeasing the Roman occupying force, and supporting the puppet-king Herod. And these two extremes join forces to discredit Jesus and his peaceful, bridge-building, Kingdom of God movement which was gaining momentum across Galilee and was now in Jerusalem itself. Jesus preached the way of non-violence and challenged those who felt that they had power to put others down.

It seemed a good trick – to use a political question to trap Jesus. Whatever his answer, it would be wrong! If his answer to the question on paying taxes was ‘yes,’ then he clearly was not a faithful Jew. If ‘no,’ then he clearly was instructing his followers to rise up against the occupation and made himself an enemy of the State. In a brilliant way, Jesus turns their scheming upside down and back on them. He calls it out for what it is – hypocrisy – because he knew of their malice. The denarius was not just representative of the Roman Empire, it was also real currency by which ordinary people were paid. *“Whose head is this, and whose title?”* They answered, *“The emperor’s.”* Then Jesus said to them, *“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”*

In our first lesson, we heard a powerful passage written at the time of the first exile when Cyrus, the Persian King, conquered the Babylonians and, significantly, returned the Jewish exiles to their homeland and instigated the building of the second Temple. A non-Jew effecting liberation. The passage is remarkable – Cyrus was to be God’s agent of change; in fact, God says *“I surname you, though you do not know me.”*

Within this sense of God's sovereignty over earthly empires and kingdoms comes the teachings of Jesus. But not just his teachings – his very presence; for Jesus embodied God's glory and God's sovereignty over all the created order. Writing to the Church in Corinth, Paul beautifully describes the difference between earthly power and the rule of the Kingdom of God, and why we Christians are engaged in this ministry of bridge-building. He says, "*We do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*" (2 Corinthians 4:5-6)

The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Not the emperor's face; not the face of the Pharisees; or the Herodians; not the face of political rulers or earthly kings and emperors; but the face of Jesus Christ. His face, my friends, we seek; his face we seek to reflect. As I have often said to our Usher Corps, when people come into this church – who do they see? They see your face. But do they also see the face of Jesus? In our epistle reading, Paul encourages the Church in Thessalonica: "*You became imitators of us and of the Lord...*"

As a Church, we have celebrated our 200th anniversary, but we are bound up in a greater sense of belonging within the past 2000 years. Things seem not to have changed; earthly powers still dominate; countries and terrorists use military might to get their own way; and people still scheme or make peculiar alliances. Mistrust prevails, and the voices calling for peace and justice seemed to be drowned out by loud angry voices. Like the fragile Christian communities in the Middle East, we can feel helpless, but we should not lose hope. That helplessness may be the key after all. After speaking to the Corinthian Church about the glory of God revealed in Jesus, and shining in our hearts, Paul says these beautiful, yet fragile-sounding words: "*But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.*" (2 Corinthians 4:7) If we live by that, then Awad Darawshe and people like him may not have died in vain.

God's glory is revealed through weakness, humility, and acts of service. What will our next 200 years look like? How will they be remembered? By worshipping, loving, and serving Jesus. By becoming bridge-builders like Jesus. My hope and my prayer is that we will have shown the face of Jesus Christ to a troubled world, and **his** Kingdom as a means to true peace and justice.

Or, as N.T. Wright puts it so succinctly: "*The image of the true and living God, once revealed in all its glory, is to be reflected into all the world, as was always God's intention. The mission of the Church can be summed up in the phrase "reflected glory."* When we see, as Paul says, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, we see this not for our own benefit, but so that the glory may shine in us and through us to bring light to the world that still waits in darkness and the shadow of death." ²

¹ Roger Cohen writing in the New York Times on Sunday, October 22 'Peace, a Forgotten Word, Renews its Claim in the Holy Land.'

² N.T. Wright, From "Jesus and the Identity of God" - a paper originally published in *Ex Auditu* 1998, 14, 42–56