

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, November 5, 2023

All Saints' Sunday

Procession & Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Very Rev. David Hoyle, Dean of Westminster, UK

on

Revelation 7:9-17

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All Saints – St Thomas Fifth Avenue

On the east coast of England there is a county called Norfolk. A wide, flat country and a big sky. Now it is farms and villages, a good place to walk the dog. Five hundred years ago it was rich - the heart of England's wool trade. There was money to build churches. And, O my, what churches they built. Buildings made from local flint, to defy time and weather. Muscular towers, wide windows, broad naves full of light. Now, if you are minded, you can drive down narrow roads, bowling past fields and hedges and push open some old oak door and step back into a church where, once, they knew the saints.

I am one of those people who is minded to do just that. My poor wife has followed me time and again as we have searched out Barton Turf, Potter Heigham, or Walpole St Peter. She is very patient, she is actually quite interested, but she does *count*. As I step into yet another nave, a voice behind me says 'four', or more embarrassingly 'fourteen'.

There are all kinds of reasons to visit these churches, but I go, most of all, for their rood screens. A rood is a cross. A great wooden cross and Christ hanging from the nails towering over the people up on a beam where the chancel met the nave. Below was a screen, graceful tracery, six or eight huge window frames without glass so that you could see the altar beyond and beneath that a wooden fence, waist high, with doors in the middle and panels painted with the saints. Five hundred years ago you would not have sat in your pews, you would have been hugger mugger up here next to the saints. You would be on the floor, eye level with Peter, Andrew, Thomas. In church you worshipped *with* the saints, you joined your prayers to theirs, you were numbered with them.

And these rood screens were interesting – well if you are the kind of man who visits fourteen Norfolk churches in three days you think they are interesting. You will find the saints you would expect – the apostles, Peter and your Thomas, James the Great and James the Less. Alongside them, saints that perhaps we do not know as well Lucy, Agatha, and Barbara and often even more familiar name, Walstan perhaps. You can find Walstan at Barnham Broom, Burlingham, Ludham and at Sparham. Why? Because Walstan was a local boy from Bawburgh. He was there beside you and Peter and Thomas because he had always been beside you, he was a Norfolk man; kith and kin. One of us. The saints, apostles and a local boy.

That is part of the mystery of the communion of the saints, it is the part that says it is not a mystery at all. Saints are bone of our bone, the saints are *family*, women and men with a time and a place. That really matters. A church that knows saints who come from round here, a faith that kneels with the saints, that looks them in the eye, that's a specific kind of faith. I do not know what happens here in the US, but back in the UK if there is some ghastly tragedy - a child perhaps killed in an accident - flowers will appear and

cards. The cards will say things like ‘Gone to join the angels’, or ‘shining with the stars’. I know why it feels important to say that, but the language of the saints is not angels and far off stars. Heaven comes much closer than that, you can see the footprints of the saints in local soil, you can feel the glory burn beside you. To know the saints is to know that holiness comes close. It is possible, possible here, possible now.

These saints who came from our community, whose lives we know, have gone before us and assure us that by talking about what we have known, we can begin to talk about the things that will be. The language for heaven is the language of this place, these people, the life we can describe.

This is John Donne,

we do live together already, in a holy communion of saints, and shall live together for ever, hereafter, in a glorious resurrection of bodies. ...if the dead, and we, be not upon one floor, nor under one story, yet we are under one roof. (Sermon XX)

He is speaking out of confidence, out of a certainty even, that there is a community that sweeps up the living and the dead, the saints and sinners in a shared experience and a shared hope. Christ who rose from the dead and spoke and ate with his disciples, the saints who came from our communities and are one with us still summon us into giving an account of our future in which we don’t make guesses in the dark. John Donne goes on:

This is the faith that sustains me, when I lose by the death of others, or when I suffer by living in misery myself, That the dead, and we, are now all in one church, and at the resurrection,

That is a big part of the Feast of All Saints. Their holiness and ours, a shared faith.

And yet, and yet the saints also say something else to us. Not long before I flew over here, I was at a poetry reading in London, at the British Library. That night we heard the poems of Seamus Heaney and amongst them an old favourite, *St Kevin and the Blackbird*. Heaney writes about a famous story of an Irish saint, Kevin, Abbot of Glendalough, praying in his monastic cell in Lent. Now poems are not always easy, they can be more peculiar even than men who go church crawling in Norfolk, but bear with me, this is not a tricky poem.

The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands
And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

Pictures of Kevin are always pictures of the saint and the bird together. It is wonderful, but honestly, it is odd, it is other, it really is not from round here. This is a faith that startles and unsettles us. Here is an extraordinary sanctity, a summons to another life entirely. Heaney knows that, knows also that we are into the land of myth and otherness. He wonders what it was like, what was true, what we should imagine. And he ends his poem in wonder and in praise.

Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

... Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

Kevin turned into prayer, a rare sanctity, self forgotten. That is nothing we know.

shall be all in one choir.

We need to spend a bit more time with the saints, the community we come from, the hope fashioned out of the world we know. We need to know who we are and only then begin to think about what we might become. Christ, who rose from the dead, invites us to a Kingdom he consistently described as being like the things we know, The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who gave a feast, the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great price... That is what the saints knew, that is what they try to tell us, that this world and their lives speak of what lies before us and we should pay attention.

We heard the Book of Revelation, we saw a great multitude standing before the throne of God,

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying... "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Revelation 7:13-14

The saints are a window into heaven and that is what we have today. A window and a road to heaven in the company of people who are like us, even from round here. This same window and road is shared by others who are not like us at all. The saints are the company we keep, they make holiness possible *and* they remind us that it can be extraordinary. The saints – our past and our future. The saints are the shape and colour of our hope.