

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, October 20, 2024**

THE FEAST OF THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE  
DEDICATION OF THE CHURCH

**Procession and Solemn Eucharist**

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

Genesis 28:11-18; 1 Peter 2:1-10; John 10:22-29

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## Living Stones

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams says this: *“When we come back to our places after taking Communion, we ought to look at our next-door neighbors with awe and amazement. The person next to me – whom I may love deeply, may not know at all, may dislike, may even fear – is God’s special, honored guest, praying Christ’s prayer, living from Christ’s life. Just for this moment, they are touched with the glory of the end of all things; and so are we.”* <sup>[1]</sup>

### Being touched with the glory of God.

Jacob had a dream and, in his dream, he saw a vision of angels; they helped to connect heaven and earth. Jacob received a promise from God – a not simply about his future, but a promise that would affect him in the present. When Jacob woke up, what did he say? *“Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”* Significantly, he took the stone that had been his pillow and turned it into what the bible calls a ‘pillar’ – a sacred symbol – and Jacob named the place *Bethel* – which is Hebrew for ‘House of God.’

For a brief moment, Jacob had been touched by the glory of God – the glory of the end of all things that would affect his living in the present moment.

Today, we celebrate the anniversary of the dedication of this house of God – Saint Thomas Church – appropriately known as the Gate of Heaven because of the effect this building has on those who enter it. Just three days ago, we celebrated the tenth anniversary of the death of Father John Andrew, the eleventh Rector of Saint Thomas Church. I love his description of his first encounter with Saint Thomas:

*Most of the English cathedrals were known to me. But I was taken aback by this place, with all its splendor, its familiarity, as if it and I had known each other forever. The mutual recognition hit me with the force of a blow, and I knelt where I was. I got up knowing that life and my life were in some way to be shared. When I came out, I was secretly betrothed.*

He was touched with the glory of God.

And can we, my friends.

Jacob took a stone and made a pillar which is similar to a cairn, or a pile of rocks that you find in Scotland and the North of Europe – used as markers of sacred places or burial sites, or as aids to help people navigate a rugged landscape. In a similar way, this church, made of stones set on Fifth Avenue and 53<sup>rd</sup> Street is a kind of cairn, a biblical pillar, and an aid to help people navigate a rugged landscape.

Now, it would be easy to think, like the Landmarks Commission, that it is the Kentucky limestone, carved and shaped, stone and stone, that makes Saint Thomas so special. In one respect they are right – after all, the limestone itself is a beautiful thing having been created during the Silurian and Mississippian geological periods 330–450 million years ago! Just think about that! This church was once a beach! But the physical building is only part of the story. This is a house of God and a gate of heaven, but it requires people to inhabit it in order for the building to come alive, otherwise, it is in danger of becoming simply a museum. Listen to the words of St. Peter we heard earlier:

*Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*

We are living stones built into a spiritual house. What that means is that God not only dwells in this sacred space, **God dwells in you and me**, and above all, in this community that is gathered today in this sacred space. Now, living in community is not easy; in fact, it can be quite hard! As Rowan Williams said, *'the person next to me...I may love deeply, may not know at all, may dislike, may even fear.'* Most of us know that growing up in our families when we were young, and especially as we navigated adolescence, were sometimes challenging times. It is the same with the Christian Church and, for those who are joining us this weekend in New York, it is the same for the members of the Venerable Order of St. John who have spent the weekend here; making community is hard for it demands that we all respect one another with integrity, treating one another as if we were talking to Jesus himself. That is as true of the Holy Land now as it was then. Perhaps that is why St. Peter prefaces his words on living stones with an admonition: *'Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander.'*

Jesus calls you and me into a new kind of relationship. We are bound to one another whether we like it or not! And when times are tough, we do well to remember the words of Jesus from our Gospel today: *"I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."*

**No one will snatch them out of my hand.**

Seven years ago, when preaching on this feast day, I shared with you a vision I had for Saint Thomas Church. Let me share it again because, in spite of the pandemic, people moving away or dying, our financial problems with the huge cost of the upkeep of this glorious church and its Choir School, I believe that we have been living that vision in spite of all the things that might set us back. In 2017, I said this:

Here, at St Thomas Church, I want us to become a truly multi-generational church where large numbers of people of all ages are not only welcomed but can find a home. A church that is representative of where we are in Midtown Manhattan – and, in particular, ethnically diverse and

vibrant because of it. A church where love-filled service of Jesus spills out of the building, and out of our Choir School and affects the lives of those around us.

The vision I have is summed up in four simple words:

COME – STAY – GROW – GIVE.

A Church where people want to **come** – where our buildings, our worship, our music, our pastoral care, our education, our school, and our outreach makes us attractive to those outside. A community putting into action the simple words of the apostle Philip who said, “Come and see!” A Church where we will bring our families, our friends, our workmates, and our neighbors.

A Church where people will want to **stay** because they have a sense of belonging – welcomed because of who they are rather than what they might bring. This means examining the ways that we pastor one another as much as making provision for our priestly ministry; making sure that there are programs that satisfy and meet peoples’ needs.

A Church where people **grow** – as disciples of Christ; nurtured in the faith; deepened in their spiritual lives; enriched by our liturgy and music; nourished by exposure to things old and things new; challenged by the way Anglicanism is centered on Christ and responding to an ever-changing world.

And a Church where people want to **give**; of their time and of their talent; to one another, and to those outside its doors. A church whose members, in the words of that famous prayer attributed to St Ignatius of Loyola, ‘*do not count the cost*’. A church where financial planning is no longer a headache but a joy – because being a church where people come, stay, and grow means they support wholeheartedly its mission and its choir school that changes children’s lives; a church where giving financially is natural because it is a first and foremost a gift to God and not to a denomination or a cause.

Well, my friends, I am heartened to read those words to you again. People are coming, staying, growing, and giving – that has been the greatest joy of our Bicentennial Celebrations. But we cannot stand still; we are called to be a people ‘on the move’ and we need to strengthen that vision as we go into our next one hundred years. Yes, there will be change, and change will bring threat, but change will also bring opportunity. After all, this most glorious church building was once a beach. St. Peter shall have the last word: *“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*

## References

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- 1 Rowan Williams Tokens of Trust, page 120
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