

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 13, 2024

The Twenty-First Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon William Lamb, *Ph.D. Vicar, University Church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford*
on

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

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Seek the Lord and live

‘Seek the Lord and live.’

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is very good to be with you this morning and to bring greetings from the University Church of St Mary the Virgin and colleagues within the University of Oxford. Although this Sunday marks the beginning of first week and the beginning of a new academic year in Oxford, I was giving the Cheney Lecture at Yale Divinity School last week, and your Rector very kindly invited me to preach at St Thomas’ this morning. It is a delight to be with you today.

‘Seek the Lord and live.’ These words of the prophet Amos are words to conjure with, and they are thrown into sharp relief by our gospel reading for today. Jesus is greeted by ‘someone’ – the Greek is rather sparing in its description at this point, St Matthew refers to this person as a young man, while St Luke refers to him as a ruler. St Mark says ‘someone’. The reality is that it could be anyone, it could be us.

‘Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ It is intriguing that St Mark uses the phrase ‘eternal life’ at this point. He uses the phrase again at the end of the passage. Usually, St Mark talks about the ‘kingdom of God’ – the gospel is filled with a sense of urgency about God’s kingdom, God’s dominion, breaking into this world and turning the world upside down. But here St Mark talks about ‘inheriting’ eternal life. What does he mean?

The term ‘inheritance’ is intriguing. It is a term which recurs again and again in the Hebrew Bible. Abraham and his descendants are given the land as an ‘inheritance’, as a possession. And yet, we sometimes forget that the story of Israel over the centuries has been of a people dispossessed, a people who live in exile, a people dispersed throughout the world. And in the time of Jesus, that sense of an ‘inheritance’ has been thrown into question by the experience of occupation and colonial rule. The land promised to Abraham had been annexed by the Roman empire.

Some scholars suggest that ‘the disappointment’ of this experience led people to transpose their hopes for the future ‘into an eschatological key.’ They looked forward to the future, to the gift of eternal life.

But Jesus brings us down to earth. With his question, he echoes that ancient Jewish prayer, the *Shema* – the Lord is God: there is no other besides him – and he rehearses the commandments, the observance of the Law. But note something quite subversive is happening in Mark's text here. He rehearses the familiar commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness....' But then he adds, 'do not defraud'.

We have this curious addition to the Decalogue, an additional commandment. It sounds like a commandment, but if you look at the ten commandments, it isn't there. Of course, commentators have pointed out that the command, 'do not defraud', can be found in Leviticus and in the words of the prophet Malachi. Jesus is not adding something that isn't in the law of Moses. But the inclusion of this phrase gives the commandments a particular spin. Note that this passage, like the passage from Amos, is littered with subtle references to economics and economic injustice. References to riches and possessions and wealth and inheritance. And for those of us who live comfortable lives, who can sometimes be tempted to forget, because it is too painful to remember, that the world is filled with people who are struggling to survive, the words at the heart of the gospel today are deeply challenging. We read this passage with a furtive sense of guilt, thinking, *I'm the rich young man. I'm always holding on to something. I can never quite measure up.* And yet, there is one short phrase that we should not ignore at the heart of this passage: 'Then Jesus, beholding him, loved him.'

Here in these few brief words, we discover the depths of God's mercy, the wonder of God's love for us, the beauty of divine grace. Our perennial temptation is to imagine that grace is something that we can earn or possess. That's why we get it wrong. We are sometimes so captivated by a sense of acquisitiveness, by a desire to possess, by a compulsion to own, that we cannot imagine the capacity of God who again and again just gives it all away. That is the nature of grace. It is pure gift. That is what gives Jesus the confidence to say: 'Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.'

We imagine that salvation is something we can possess or inherit, something that we can attain through personal achievement, something that we can accumulate, building up credit like money in the bank. And yet, Jesus challenges us to give everything away. It is too much for the rich young man: 'When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.'

These words have exercised Christians through the centuries. Clement of Alexandria insisted that these words were not to be interpreted literally, but allegorically. The command to sell everything signified that the man should rid himself of his anxieties and passions about his wealth, not the wealth itself. Medieval scholastics distinguished between the 'counsels of salvation' which applied to everyone, and this 'counsel of perfection' appropriate only for those entering the religious life. So the 4th century father of monasticism, St Antony of Egypt, is celebrated for his obedience to this command in embracing a life of poverty.

The history of interpretation tells us that Christians through the centuries have been troubled by these words: 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' Even the disciples who hear these words are shocked and appalled: 'Then who can be saved?'

And yet, the message that St Mark reinforces again and again in his gospel is that the life of discipleship means following Jesus in the way of the cross. This is the way of Jesus Christ. The words in today's gospel develop a theme which Jesus has introduced in a previous chapter foretelling his

passion: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'

At the heart of the Christian gospel is the mystery of the cross and resurrection. We imagine that our wealth or privilege or intelligence or our achievements will bring salvation, will bring security in the face of the perils and uncertainties of life. But they will do nothing to protect us from the reality of death and mortality and human finitude. You can't take it with you. But we need to remember this one small moment at the heart of this gospel reading: 'Then Jesus, beholding him, loved him.' The way of Jesus Christ lies not in the accumulation of wealth or worldly success. The way of Jesus Christ lies in discovering the sovereignty of sacrificial love. That is the mystery at the heart of the gospel. It is that simple, and at the same time, it is that challenging because sometimes we find it so hard. As we enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection in this eucharist, may we learn what it means to 'Seek the Lord, and live', to discover that life of which our present lives are but a shadow, the gift of new life, eternal life, the promise of the resurrection and the depth of God's mercy. Amen.
