

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, April 06, 2025
The Fifth Sunday In Lent

Litany in Procession and Solemn Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner
on
Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8
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How do I know Jesus?

In our epistle, today, St Paul says that he wants ‘*to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.*’ This ‘knowing Christ’ is not the same as learning about history. Sure, it is easy for people to learn about Jesus from books and films, and even listen to people preach about him but *knowing* Christ means having a relationship with him now, in the present, and not like with some fictional character from a favorite novel. What we are doing here, today in the mass, is more than just play-acting. Many people love a spectacle, and the liturgy and music of the catholic expression of Anglicanism such as we experience here at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue is compelling because of its beauty; but it has a purpose and a motive – it is a way for us to *know Christ* and, as Professor Sarah Coakley reminded us so powerfully in our Spring Lecture yesterday, a way to know Christ **here in this place**.

Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, and you could say that our celebration of Holy Week is the most engaging liturgical expression of Paul’s determination **to know Christ**. Through words, symbolic actions, movement, the use of all our senses, and through our silence, we will remember. But this remembering, like the Eucharist itself, in which the liturgies of Holy Week find their context, is more than just a re-telling of an old familiar tale; we enter into the mystery in order *to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death*.

Bishop Richard Holloway takes this further, and suggests that Christian remembrance is an active engagement with the past and its effect on present realities; he suggest that Christians are, to use his term, *remembrancers*. He says this:

We would be remembrancers even if we lived for ever, but it seems to be the presence of death that provokes the keenest remembrance. The living we can revisit, but the dead we can only remember. And we do: sometimes in little glimpses, like the credit flashbacks at the end of a film; sometimes in more elaborate sequences, in which we reconstitute as much about a person as we can. It is death that makes us look back in sorrow, makes us remembrancers. But it is also death that makes us look forward in dread. ^[1]

Was there a sense of dread in the passage that was read as our Gospel reading today? Mary’s act of love and devotion expressed in the middle of the dinner prepared for Jesus was scandalous for some who were

present and, in particular, for Judas. The intimacy expressed by the anointing of the feet of Jesus with the costly perfumed nard and the wiping of his feet with Mary's hair – a gesture electric with sexual potency must have been extraordinary. But do you really think that it was only Judas who had such a negative reaction. At another meal in the same house, Mary had sat at the feet of Jesus while her sister, Martha, was doing all the work in the kitchen on her own. Luke tells us that she was distracted and complained to Jesus, to which Jesus responded *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."* (Luke 10:41)

Significantly, in the Fourth Gospel, this anointing takes place just before the triumphant entry into Jerusalem beginning a chain of events that led to the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, the author of the Fourth Gospel tells us that Jesus received that costly and expressive gesture *as a sign* of his impending passion and death. You could say that Mary, as it were, was preparing the body of Jesus for his death and burial. The irony of this is not lost on Judas, whose own part in the betrayal of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane would lead to that death. Mary was making an act of remembrance. Without any words, Mary recognized the impending anguish that Jesus would suffer ('it is also death that makes us look forward in dread' says Holloway).

For a brief moment, Mary ministers to Jesus – caring for his woundedness before the nails are ever driven into his body. Such intimacy is a sign of God's longing to be known – to be touched and to be understood. In our acts of remembrancing in this coming Holy Week we, too, can care for our own woundedness by gazing afresh at those wounds of love.

When Jesus met the disciples in the upper room, he showed them his hands and his side – his own woundedness was how he revealed to them that he was the real Jesus that they had known. His wounds are part of who Jesus is, allowing our patron Thomas to declare "My Lord and my God" not in spite of the wounds, but because of them. In the same way, our own woundedness, in whatever way it is experienced is also part of what makes us real. Henri Nouwen taught that we, therefore, need to care for our own wounds rather than hide them. Nouwen says this:

What does this 'caring for my wounds' mean? It means acknowledging them as revelations of my unique way of being human, listening to them as teachers who help me find my way to holiness, sharing them as a source of consolation and comfort, and allowing others to pour oil on them and bind them in times of great pain. ^[2]

What does all this say about our journey to be a beloved community; what does this teach us about our outreach to those who are our neighbors? At the simplest level, we are given a choice as to how we respond to others. Thinking about today's Gospel reading, are we going to be like Mary or like Judas? Ironically, Judas objects to Mary's gesture by actually referring to caring for the poor! At a deeper level, our yearning to know Christ means that we cannot do this in isolation. This is not *'my church* or *'my faith'* but **our church** and **our faith** which means we must put it into practice together, as a community, and to make a difference *here in this place*.

Going still deeper, it means acknowledging our own woundedness so that we are not afraid of the wounds of our neighbors. On the first Sunday of Lent I suggested that we must start with ourselves, and examine who we are. In so doing we are more able to recognize the wounds of others in a more compassionate way rather than simply superficially. It connects with the words of Fr. Luigi I quoted last week: *"Think of the kind of community and the kind of world we can build in this way, where nobody who gets lost despairs of being*

rescued, nobody who is alone gives up the hope of finding a home to go back to, nobody who is withering or deprived of the chance of becoming fruitful again.” And the kind of community that we are attempting to build in this place has blurred boundaries, my friends: We discover who we are and, indeed, *whose* we are when we recognize those blurred boundaries and take the risk to discover Jesus not simply in the confines of beautiful liturgy and music, or in this glorious building, but in one another, and in the lives of our neighbors on the street. As Sarah Coakley said yesterday at the end of her lecture:

“To pray in any place, in any parish, is to sign on to a life of intimate connection in the body of Christ; it is to begin to acknowledge, in due course, the costliness of the outworking of that desire for Christ in this, particular, setting, this particular place...” ^[3]

I want to know Christ. Which demands that I know myself and, therefore, my neighbor too.

Let me end with some words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She was once asked if her work was simply social work, and she said

That is what someone said recently – that we are they were doing social work, and that is true. But the difference is that we do it to somebody and for Christ. That is where the love and the devotion come in, that we do it for Christ and that is why we try to do it as beautifully as possible. It is the same as the mass – there we have Jesus in the appearance of bread, but here in the streets, in the broken body, in the little children, we see Christ and we touch him. ^[4]

References

- 1 Richard Holloway, *‘Anger, Sex, Doubt, and Death,’* SPCK 1992 p. 87-88
 - 2 Henri Nouwen, From an unpublished journal – in *‘Seeds of Hope,’* DLT 1989, p.126
 - 3 Sarah Coakley, Lecture: *‘The Parish as Divine “Place”: The Healing of Body, Desire and Society,’* Saint Thomas Fifth Avenue, New York, April 5, 2025
 - 4 Mother Teresa and Malcolm Muggeridge, *‘Something Beautiful for God,’* Harper One republished 2003
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