

## SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, October 26, 2025**

The Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

Luke 18:9-14

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### **'The humble God is the answer to the folly of all our self-conceit.'**

I went to Seminary in the early 1980's to Saint Stephen's House, Oxford, the Church of England's leading Anglo-Catholic Theological College, founded in 1876 by the saintly Bishop of Lincoln, Edward King. My fellow seminarians and I prided ourselves on learning to do things 'the proper way.' St. Stephen's House, Oxford was affectionately known as 'Staggers,' and around the Church of England clergy trained there would often be described as a 'Staggers' Priest. We even had Staggers' cassocks different from everyone else's – with not three back-pleats but *five*, rounded 'mandarin' collars, and 39 buttons – one for each of the 39 articles of religion found at the back of the 1662 Prayer Book (though many of my more severe friends left the button that corresponded to the pope having (quote) 'no jurisdiction in this realm of England' undone!). It was, though, a time of real formation for me, and I learned the disciplines of how to pray, to discover the gift of silence, and how to pastor the penitent. However, it also brought out the tendency in me and my fellow seminarians to look down on the other theological colleges and find fault. We were most certainly self-righteous and prided ourselves on the glory of our seminary, set amidst the dreaming spires of Oxford.

I think I have mentioned before how, on Fridays, we simply had soup and bread for lunch. Since we often had seminars on Friday afternoons and, I am afraid to say that, oftentimes, a crowd of us would go to the local pub to eat meat pies and fries before the seminars – just to keep us going. We also used to like to go back to the pub in the evening and play darts with the locals; we thought of ourselves as missionaries taking the Gospel to the people of East Oxford – in truth, it was also an excuse to go to the pub! After the pub closed at 10:30pm, there was a tradition of a few of us going to a local curry house for something to eat. We had a favorite Indian Restaurant called the *Kashmiri Halal* and Mr. Khan, the owner, was always very kind to us. One particular evening, we arrived to a very empty restaurant (it was getting on for 11pm of course) and we ordered our curry. I remember the seminarians who were with me – Two are now Bishops – one is now an Archbishop – and two are Deans of cathedrals. But back then, we were more important because we were seminarians from St. Stephen's House Oxford, and we knew better than Deans and Bishops.

The food never came. We got very frustrated munching on our poppadums, and one of the group called Mr. Khan over and said very pompously, "Mr. Khan! If we do not get our food soon, we will never eat here again!" Mr. Khan bowed politely and said, "I am so sorry, sir. It is Ramadan, and we are praying."

What makes this confession even worse is the fact that it was a Friday in Lent and this was actually our second dinner that evening!

Some 100 years following the founding of Saint Stephen's House, in 1976, Archbishop Michael Ramsey was preaching at Nashotah House Theological Seminary in Wisconsin on one of his favorite words from John's gospel – **glory**. He said this.

*What is the glory of God? There had been the longing of men through the ages to know what the glory of God is really like. "Show me, I pray thee, thy glory." [said Moses]. What is his glory really like, the glory of the infinite one who created the universe, who rules and reigns from eternity to eternity? The veil is drawn away. The glory of our God is like Jesus washing the feet of the apostles. Yes it's the glory of God who humbles himself. God humbles himself in the creation of the world, humbles himself in all the dealings with the created world in time and history, humbles himself in all his dealings with us his greatly loved, utterly wayward children. And that is the message of divine glory for our proud and arrogant world of men and nations...A humble God! It is such a God whom we worship, giving glory to Him. Come let us worship him. Come, let us adore him. The humble God is the answer to the folly of all our self-conceit. [1]*

Just ponder on that for a moment, my friends:

**The humble God is the answer to the folly of all our self-conceit.**

When the priest prepares the altar at mass, there are some prayers that are said secretly by the priest and, at seminary, we learned them off by heart. One of them accompanies the mixing of the chalice at the offertory – that is, adding a drop of water into the wine. The priest says very quietly, "By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity." That prayer comes from an ancient collect from the 7<sup>th</sup> century still used in our Prayer Book during the Christmas season: "O God, who didst wonderfully create, and yet more wonderfully restore, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord."

This reflects Paul's understanding of the humility of God. We read in Paul's letter to the Philippians:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-6)*

This 'self-emptying' of God into his creation is the greatest sign of the humility of God but also his greatest glory. For the glory of God is not like human glory that we see so often in our world today: the promotion of celebrity status; the importance of being an 'influencer' on social media; of having hundred and thousands of 'followers'; of having power or control over others; all of which leads to self-aggrandizement, and the diminishing of the image of God in the person. Jesus came not to make us feel small and insignificant; the paradox of the incarnation is that when God made *himself* small in the womb of Mary he opened up the possibility for humankind to be magnified! To discover true glory once again – in other words, to discover what is really means to be made in the image of God. And note that Paul says to the Church in Philippi, "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...*" The message of the humble God revealing his glory through love-filled service is to be our vocation too.

Archbishop Rowan Williams once said, "*the blinding power of God is exercised not in crushing and controlling, but in the sacrifice of love.*"

**The blinding power of God is exercised not in crushing and controlling, but in the sacrifice of love.** <sup>[2]</sup>

*The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'*

This week, my friends, when you are tempted to feel self-righteous; or to put someone down; or you simply feel out of sorts with the world, pause for a minute and reflect on the humility of God who emptied himself so that we might become true to our vocation.

*The tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*

*'I tell you,' said Jesus, 'this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.'*

## References

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- 1 Nashotah Review 1976 p.232
  - 2 Sermon preached in Canterbury Cathedral, Sunday 2nd March 2003
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