

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, January 25, 2026
The Conversion of Saint Paul

**Solemn Eucharist & Commemoration of Martin
Luther King Jr.**
11:00 am

+

A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

+

Love in a Safe Space

“Martyrdom is excessive, extravagant and foolish. Martyrdom is an affirmation of profound witness about the depths of human possibility in the face of what can in some circumstances seem like fathomless evil. Martyrdom affirms that there is something worth dying for, and it is the grace, the love, the infinite compassion of God.”¹

Words of Rowan Williams at an ecumenical gathering celebrating the martyrs of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches.

Every time I turn on the news or read the newspaper, I see stories of what Rowan Williams describes as ‘fathomless evil.’ There seems to be so much anger and violence in our world, and so much abuse of power. Extremism seems to be on the rise everywhere, but we, part of the body of Christ here in midtown Manhattan, are called to bear witness to a different way of living.

Two words come to mind today for me – conversion and witness.

Paul was a conservative Pharisaic Jew; and *his* extreme views led him to become a violent man; someone who used violence to silence others. No wonder the early followers of Jesus did not trust him and were afraid of him. The irony is that this man, this extremist, repented of his former ways and his bearing witness of Jesus Christ led to his own death, his own martyrdom. But that bearing witness, made a qualitative change to our world, and to the church; as the collect put it so succinctly, “*by the preaching of your apostle Paul you have caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world.*”

Today, we also reflect on the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who sought that kind of radical conversion for those who promoted racial segregation and who witnessed to the transforming power of Jesus in his life and in his death. Like St. Paul, he was not perfect, but bore witness to the radical notion of non-violence as the only way forward. Like Paul, this led him into direct conflict with others – a conflict that he did not shy away from, but a conflict that made him even more determined to preach Christ’s way of love – of returning insult with blessing, and not to give up hope. Psychologists tell us that, when under attack or fearful, the natural human response is *fight or flight*. Paul, MLK, and the martyrs of our church

did neither. As Dr. King once said, *“The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience and comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.”*²

or, as Rowan Williams said, *“Martyrdom is an affirmation of profound witness about the depths of human possibility in the face of what can in some circumstances seem like fathomless evil.”*

Today, we bear witness with Paul, with Martin Luther King Jr., and with women and men who have borne witness to the transformative power of Jesus Christ. We stand by the poor and the downtrodden; we stand by the refugee and the asylum seeker; we stand by those who are told to be silent; we stand by those who have had their human rights eroded; we stand by those who have their homeland violated; we stand by those who are sick or at the point of death; we stand by all who, like Saint Paul, want to resist evil and who believe that there is a different way of building community and society. As we attempt to build a beloved community here in Midtown Manhattan, and across the world through our livestream ministry, we bear witness to the love of Jesus Christ that binds us all together; Christ’s way of non-violent revolution – of resisting evil and embracing the way of Jesus Christ – the way of love. On receiving his Nobel Peace Prize, Dr. King said, *“Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love...violence ends up defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers.”*³

But as Jesus reminded his disciples in our Gospel reading today, that kind of resistance comes at a cost; “you will be hated by all because of my name.” Yet as Rowan Williams reminds us, *“Martyrdom affirms that there is something worth dying for, and it is the grace, the love, the infinite compassion of God.”*

Last week, when I preached on the Confession of Peter, I suggested that power in the Kingdom of God is not exercised like earthly, human power, through domination and control; but, rather, power in the Kingdom of God is exercised through love-filled service; through creating a space for all, including the vulnerable and the needy; through putting Jesus first and above our own needs and aspirations. That, my friends, is at the heart of our mission here at Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue – to worship, love, and serve our Lord Jesus Christ. By worshipping the Lord, we learn how to love God and love one another; and once we experience that kind of love, we are able to serve others with that same kind of love.

Yesterday, in the bitter cold, volunteers from our church welcomed our guests to have breakfast with us. Because of the extreme cold (for those on-line, the windchill was -20 degrees Celsius or -4 degrees Fahrenheit) we moved into the warmth of the Narthex. I talked with a number of our guests and I was really struck by what Christine said to me – she said, *“I wondered if you would still serve breakfast in this cold but when I got here, I was amazed to see that you welcomed us inside.”* Tom, one of our volunteers who happens to be an architect commented to me that it was exactly what a Narthex is designed to be – a place of welcome. In truth, my friends, the warmth was not generated by our heating system, but by the love expressed and shown by our guests themselves and our volunteers. Fr. Luigi was amazed how many came – over 80 in the bitter cold – and it reminded me of one of the presentations that we heard at our Bicentennial Symposium on Communities of Faith and Civil Society, when Ana Franca Ferreira described very vividly of the creation of a ‘warm space’ which allows people to feel safe and to be themselves. Ana Said, *“sometimes we think that people who are living in precarious conditions need a massive change, but sometimes all they need is someone to ask them how they are.”* So, I guess, a warm space is more than a room – it is a place where all can feel that they matter, where all can feel that they belong.

On Thursday, at evensong, Mr. Tanner chose an anthem that is often sung on Maundy Thursday, Ubi Caritas – the chant for the washing of the feet:

I

*Where charity and love are, God is there.
Christ's love has gathered us together into one.
Let us rejoice and be pleased in Him.
Let us fear, and let us love the living God.
And may we love each other with a sincere heart.
Where charity and love are, God is there.
As we are gathered into one body,
Beware, lest we be divided in mind.
Let evil impulses stop, let controversy cease,
And may Christ our God be in our midst.*

Christ's love has gathered us together into one. If we were writing new verses for that chant, perhaps we might also add a verse that says "Christ's love has created a warm space for us all."

Some words of Dr. King, "The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends...It is an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. It is the love of God working in the lives of men. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization."⁴.

1. Rowan Williams' Remarks: Upon Accepting the 2009 Campion Award
 2. ². Martin Luther King Jr. from his 1963 book, *Strength to Love*.
 3. Martin Luther King 1964 Nobel Peace Lecture
 4. from "The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma," 1957
-