

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, May 10, 2026

The Sixth Sunday Of Easter

Festal Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia

on

Zechariah 8:1-13; Revelation 21:22-22:5

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A Holy City

Some 25 years ago I visited a small village in the French region of Champagne, to the South-west of Paris, called Mesnil-Saint-Loup. I was the guest of a Benedictine Community affiliated to the monastic family I belonged to at the time and spent few days there. During that visit I discovered the unusual history of this community founded in the mid 19th century by a parish priest, the Pere Emmanuel André (1826-1903). He ministered indefatigably to the same parish for over 50 years – something not unusual at that time – and yet found the time to become an expert in Eastern Orthodox Liturgies, launch an academic journal, and translate the Psalms into French from the Hebrew.

France had suppressed all Catholic religious orders in the wake of the French Revolution but this eventually resulted in an impressive renewal of religious life during the 19th Century. This rebirth was driven by the energy and sometimes the forceful personality of diocesan priests who bravely defied the intolerance of secularism. At Mesnil-Saint-Loup, Pere Emmanuel André made the whole parish a Benedictine community! Remarkably, he managed to bring to faith everyone in the village: they worshipped daily like monks and nuns, followed strict Christian ethical principles, even dressed in what was considered appropriate to Christian modesty, especially after Pere Emmanuel's relentless campaign to get all the women to wear 'bonnets', a type of hat tied under the chin.

I was initially impressed by this feat of evangelization. With time though I started to have reservations about some of these pastoral practices and their underlying spirituality. Uniformity is always suspicious, especially when, as in the case of Mesnil-Saint-Loup, it is achieved by insulating a community from the rest of the world.

Like many others in the course of Christian history, this eager parish priest was driven by the vision of the new Jerusalem we heard in the prophecy of Zechariah:

Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city [... All its inhabitants, old and young] shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness (Zechariah 8:2-7)

Many reformers, notably Calvin in Geneva, thought that this prophecy applied to their city, or village, or even the whole nation, and could be quite domineering in implementing this vision.

If you think this is a temptation of the past, just pay closer attention to some of the current trends in Christianity. Many today are driven by the aspiration to make whole countries faithful and virtuous

nations again by means of politics, lobbying, and sometimes the marginalization or even the attempt to suppress beliefs, behaviours, and social attitudes deemed incompatible with the Gospel.

This is a recurrent temptation for Christians throughout history and requires us to examine honestly whether the logic of the Gospel lead to conformity and intolerance. After all, is not God proclaiming in Zechariah that he is a jealous God who wants to edify a faithful city where all people are righteous? Can Christianity really respect, affirm and value diversity?

The book of Revelation suggests an answer to these questions. John too (to whom the book of Revelation is attributed) has his version of what a holy and faithful city should look like – with a significant variation from Zechariah though. He declares

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. (Rev 21:22f)

John's holy city bathes in the light emanating from the Lamb – an image that immediately conveys peacefulness, gentleness – anything but coercion, supremacy, and control. This is exactly how the Gospel portrays Jesus. Right from his first appearance on the public scene, he is introduced by John the Baptist as “the Lamb of God”. Matthew describes Jesus as the silent suffering servant prophesied by Isaiah who does not “quarrel or cry aloud”, does not break the bruised reed nor quench the smouldering wick (Mt 12:18-21). He wants his disciples to learn from him who is meek and humble of heart (Mt 11:29). In his Sermon on the Mountain, he lists the traits that should characterise Christians: they can be the light of the world and the salt of the earth only insofar as, like him, they are meek, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, take the extra mile with those who antagonize them, love their enemies, and do not judge (Mt 5-7). In another of his memorable sermons, he proclaims that he will recognize as his disciples only those who give food to the hungry and drink to those who are thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those who are in prison (Mt 25).

Jesus does send his disciples to proclaim his message to the whole world but wants them to be lambs like him: “I send you as lambs among the wolves” (Lk 10:3). They should not impose themselves on others, lord over them, seek greatness by exercising authority. On the contrary, they should aspire to be servants of all, just as Jesus did (Mt 20:25ff).

The greatest among the first generation of Christian preachers, Paul, warned that the message of the Gospel spreads not through clever arguments, certainly not through lobbying or coercion, but by relying only on the persuasive power of the love God manifested on the cross – another way of talking about Jesus as the Lamb sacrificed for us. In one of his most lyric passages Paul declares

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. [...] To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. (1 Cor 9:19-23)

These are not the words of someone who thinks that Christian faith, values, and ethical principles can ever be spread by “quarrelling or crying aloud”, that is by making them legally or even simply culturally mandatory. The real disciple of Jesus becomes weak with the weak, does not judge, and wins over others through the persuasive power of compassion, patience, care, and genuine respect for everyone.

In the end though all human efforts to bring people to faith, not only misguidedly through coercion but even by persuasion, cannot achieve anything by themselves. The image of the Lamb in the book of Revelation contains another crucial detail. What brings light to the city are not the preachers, the disciples, the churches, but the Lamb and the Lamb only. Even zealous apostles like Paul knew that what ultimately leads people to believe in the God of Jesus Christ are not their words, nor their example, however loving and compassionate. When Paul says that he relies only on Jesus' cross, he means that only when people finally get a glimpse of God's own love they open their hearts and welcome the Good News.

Ultimately, Christianity teaches us that whenever we try to impose our beliefs on others, it is not God that we are serving but ourselves – which is what Scripture calls idolatry. Christianity also offers the remedy to this temptation, especially when we celebrate the Eucharist. At one point, just before communion, we are asked to turn our eyes away from the magnificence of our buildings, the persuasiveness of our preaching, the power of our institutions, and rely only on Jesus' ultimate gift of his love and life: the bread is broken, raised high to become the lamp on the stand that gives light to all those in the house (Mt 5:15), and the vision of the book of Revelation is brought before our eyes as we hear these words:

Behold the Lamb of God. Behold he who alone takes away the sin and the idolatry of the world. Blessed are those who are called to his supper.
