SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, October 18, 2026 **Solemn Eucharist**
Saint Luke 11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Right Reverend and Right Honourable Dr. Rowan Williams, *104th Archbishop of Canterbury*

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Sermon for the Feast of Saint Luke

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

In various churches around the Mediterranean, it's possible to see pictures of the Virgin and Child, allegedly painted by St. Luke.

It's quite a charming thought: Luke, the physician, taking a cheap holiday break in Galilee with his watercolours, doing a little picture of a local peasant woman and her baby. It has to be said in all honesty that the historical base for this is just a bit fragile. But what was it that persuaded the church to think of St Luke as not only a physician but an artist?

We know from the New Testament that Luke is described as a physician, as a healer. But at some point before the Middle Ages really got underway, the legends began to circulate that he was also a painter. Is it because there is such a painterly quality about some of his writing? Think about it—so many of our images of the life of Jesus are in fact rooted in the stories that St. Luke tells: the Annunciation, the Shepherds and the Angels, the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, the Supper at Emmaus. Maybe it's not entirely surprising that people thought that someone who could write a gospel like that knew about painting, knew how to bring a scene alive.

Well, there's one sermon that could be preached about doctors and artists, a sermon reminding physicians that theirs is a healing art, not just a healing science. The other side of the story, though, is no less important. There is something of the physician about the artist. The great artist begins not simply with a vision of the beauty of the world, but with a vision of what is lacking.

I recall many years ago listening to a rather distinguished Canadian sculptor saying that he had discovered his vocation as an artist by going 'round an art gallery and thinking, 'There's something missing here, and it's my work.' Artists may be saints, but they're not always modest. But the point is that the artist does their work not simply as a matter of self-expression, but as a matter of making the world whole, making a broken and incomplete world that little bit more full and real.

The artist doesn't decorate the world with unnecessary extras to entertain, to while away the time. The artist knows that the world needs healing, that the world needs completion. And that's why great art is not simply consoling, but transfiguring. Great tragic dramas, music that is characterised by profound dissonance, difficulty and struggle, complex poetry…all of these things are attempts to do justice to a world that is truly broken and fractured, and yet a world that, so to speak, longs to be drawn together, to be completed, to be fulfilled. And a society that regards art simply as entertainment, as leisure activity, as icing on a not-very-appetising cake, is a society that has not yet looked itself in the face, a society that doesn't know quite how deep its need is and how much it calls out for healing and completion.

So reflecting on St. Luke as healer and artist, we might think about our own calling as Christians, to be both healers and artists. Our own calling, first of all, to be truthful about our disease, to recognise where and how we are broken, to recognise the disintegration that pervades our human life individually and collectively, to recognise our helplessness in the face of what you might call moral and spiritual pandemic.

Begin with that honesty. Recognize that, to turn to the words of the gospel this morning, we need to know we are poor before we can hear the good news addressed to the poor. We need to know we are sick before we can call out for our healing. We as disciples of Jesus are first then called to that kind of honesty. This is not the world as God intended it to be. This is a world where, "things fall apart [and] the centre cannot hold," as the poet said. Just at the moment, that sense of disintegration, impending violence and disaster, is heavier than it's been in the lifetimes of most of us. And to be Christian, to be a person of faith, is not to have a neat and satisfactory way of avoiding that hard truth. To be a Christian is to look unflinchingly into what it's like for human beings to be broken.

But as believers, we don't talk only of brokenness. As artists, we don't simply take despairing photographs of the chaos of the world. We set ourselves to imagine healing, to tell stories of healing, to imagine a world fuller, richer, more serious, more loving than the one we see around. We tell stories. We tell stories of lives that have been healed. We share with one another the stories of our saints and our heroes to remind ourselves that our humanity may not be such a paltry thing as it sometimes seems.

And here, above all, at the Holy Communion, we tell one particular story of healing and imagination. We tell the story of that human life. in which healing and art came together. And how very telling, incidentally, that one great medieval theologian referred to Jesus Christ as the art of the Father. We tell that story of Jesus, whose entire identity is to do with healing the world, reimagining humanity, restoring the image of God in humanity, undertaking the most extensive and costly work of art restoration there has been in the history of the universe. Restoring the brightness of the colour; restoring the depth of the perspective; restoring the balance and beauty of the composition; re-placing us in new relation to one another; filling out the humanity that can so often be abstracted, reduced to number and statistic and algorithm. Jesus Christ restores our humanity in full, pronounces the good news to the poor, and release to the captives. Jesus Christ releases in us the humanity we can't quite grow into left to ourselves.

And we don't only tell that story. Sticking to the image of art, we make of it this drama that we are involved in this morning: the drama of the Holy Eucharist. Where we recall how Jesus, with those he knew would betray him, handing over his love, his power, and his spirit in full knowledge of our capacity to betray and run away, and yet, faithfully determined to renew and restore us. Here we—betrayers. confused, evasive, frightened—we are summoned to receive a healed life and to show to the world a new image of humanity. Our task then is to go out and tell that story and kindle again the imagination of our world, just as the great artist does. And in that kindling of imagination, to bring healing.

One of the earliest Christian writers, at the beginning of the second century, describes the Holy Communion as the medicine of immortality. Do you want to be cured of deathliness? Do you want to be set free from your addiction to death, to failure, to the sad and sorry dramas of an isolated self? Or do you want to be set free for life, life without limit and condition, life in relation with God and God's creation? If so, here is the medicine.

And as we receive that medicine of immortality at the table of Jesus Christ, we become, just briefly, fleetingly, but really, images of that first great image, broken and imperfect reflections of that great and definitive portrait of the love and purpose of God, which is Jesus Christ our Saviour, In our lives. in our witness, in our protest, our service, our attention we restore the image. We tell the world once again who God is and who we might be: physicians and artists, healers and re-creators alike.

With St. Luke, we commit ourselves afresh to that service of renewal, that service of addressing the deep pain and confusion. of where we are, addressing the suffering that obliterates the divine image in so many. We commit ourselves to letting the image of Jesus live in us. And today, at the Holy Communion, we invite his life to be ours, as he has promised that it will be, by taking our life to be his.

St. Luke may not have painted any actual pictures of the Virgin and Child. But he painted in his words that picture of humanity-made-new, sitting on Mary's lap, growing into full human experience, transfiguring it from within, and releasing us. As we look at Mary with her son on her lap, we might say, as Jesus says in the synagogue in this morning's Gospel, "Today the scripture is fulfilled in your sight," as it is here and now. at the Lord's table, in our sight.