



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, November 4, 2007
The Solemnity of All Saints

Solemn Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend William A. Greenlaw
Rector, Church of the Holy Apostles
in the City of New York

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***25 YEARS OF THE HOLY APOSTLES SOUP KITCHEN:
THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO THE HUNGER CRISIS IN OUR CITY***

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

In the gospel for this festal day, we have heard the familiar Beatitudes uttered by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. In the parallel passage in St. Luke's gospel, Jesus says it even more plainly: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."

The church has always been concerned when people are hungry and in need, and I am honored to be here in this great church this morning at the kind invitation of Father Mead, to tell you a very contemporary story of the church responding to those in desperate need.

In the early 1980's, hunger and homelessness emerged on a considerable scale in the cities of our great land—New York preeminent among them. Holy Apostles is a small parish at Ninth Avenue and 28th Street. It was uncertain if Holy Apostles had a future when my predecessor, Father Rand Frew became rector in 1978. But as increasing numbers of hungry folks came by asking for food, Father Frew resolved to do something, even so. Against seemingly impossible odds, he found support—including support from Canon John Andrew, then rector of St. Thomas—to start a soup kitchen. Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen opened on October 22, 1982, and we served 35 guests that day. I arrived at Holy Apostles a few months after that opening, and we were already serving hundreds every weekday.

To our complete astonishment and only through God's grace and the support of so many, we rapidly became the largest program of its kind in the entire Episcopal Church nationally, the largest of its kind, period, in the Northeast, and one of the largest in the country. In the 25-year history we have just marked, we have been open every weekday of the year, have never missed a serving day, and have never turned away a person who was hungry who came to us during our serving hours.

I wish I could tell you that the need was abating, that we could finally envision the day when we could close because the problem of hunger in our city had been solved. I'm very sorry to tell you instead that the need is increasing, that we are serving more meals than

ever before. We passed the six million mark during the summer and are now serving more than 300,000 meals a year, on many days now serving more than 1,400 meals. This year will be the biggest year in our history by far.

And yet while we and many of the other nearly 1,000 faith-based emergency food providers of our city are breaking all records, the shelves are increasingly bare at the Food Bank that distributes emergency food at very low cost from a variety of sources. As a result, and because food must now be bought on the open market with every program strapped for operating funds, smaller programs are turning away large numbers of people and many may close—which means ever more guests come to us. And as our food and costs therefore escalate dramatically, we wonder increasingly how we are going to make it, for hunger is old news—and yesterday's issue. And good people and foundations alike want to go on to something else.

But enough of statistics and facts. What I really want to share with you this morning is something that I and all of us need to at times be reminded of: that every hungry and homeless person in our city, that each guest we serve is a child of God. A person created in the image of God, incredibly precious in the eyes of God, beloved of God. The kind of persons our Lord loved and sought out and cared for. The kind of persons we are enjoined by our Lord to reach out to and serve—over and over again in the New Testament. In season and out of season.

Each one of our guests has a story—a very human story—that often breaks your heart as you listen to them. Their tragedies are real and palpable—and hurt deeply. It is not an easy thing to have lost everything and to have nowhere to turn, where it is clear nearly everyone wishes you did not exist and would just go away. Where always, eyes are averted and doors closed in their faces.

But there is a very different side as well. A remarkable number of our guests have a deep and profound faith in God. So often I hear our guests praising God for things I never think about: thanking God they had a place to sleep last night. Thanking God they have just had a very hearty and nutritious meal in a place of welcome and positive spirit. Thanking God they have made it to a new day. Very often, I learn so much from those we seek to serve. Very often, I see none other than the face of Christ in the one with whom I am speaking. And when that happens, I am reminded why we do what we do, and I am resolved, God willing, to continue for as long as it takes.

We had a tragic fire in our church in 1990, yet somehow we managed to serve 943 guests a cold but nonetheless hearty meal the very next day. Amazing and wonderful people from all over told us we had to rebuild, and that they would be with us.

What has emerged is a beautiful restored landmark church. Instead of replacing the burned out pews, we use cathedral seating for services and other events. But during the week we put in tables and chairs, and the nave of the Church of the Holy Apostles is literally the main dining room of the Holy Apostles Soup Kitchen--right before the altar.

Our guests dine in a place of beauty and hope and inspiration—where they are our honored guests and are made to feel beloved of not only God, but by our volunteers and staff we have as well. And the result is that many of our guests are enabled to take those first steps toward recovery and getting connected so that their myriad problems might begin to be addressed.

On this All Saints' Sunday, I need to say that we do what we do through the grace of God and the personal and tangible support of so many far and wide. I am proud to tell you St. Thomas Church has stood with us from the beginning. Canon Andrew and Father Mead

have always been available when I needed their wise counsel and a shoulder to lean on. I want to thank them, and I want to thank your vestry and grants committee, and, indeed, this entire congregation, for your wonderful support.

Every day we need fifty volunteers who come from near and far. For many years your former warden, Joan Hoffman volunteered nearly every Monday. And we are proud to count among our current volunteers an occasional visit from Nancy Mead, and Frances Mintz; Eugene Mintz is a regular volunteer with us.

I want to close by sharing with you a simple handwritten letter I received a couple of weeks ago. It may not use overtly religious language, but it reminds me all over again of why we do what we do.

Dear Father Greenlaw:

I know that you all are getting ready to celebrate your 25th anniversary of the soup kitchen. Congratulations! I wanted to write just to share that I was there eating at the soup kitchen the first day it opened. I was living on the streets then and a friend and I came... We were so excited. Food was hard to find... It took a lot of walking to find food.

I am no stranger to the soup kitchen now either. I eat there several times a month. I live at the Prince George, a supportive SRO. With Holy Apostles I can be among people if I'm isolating too much, it helps make ends meet, and also when I'm not taking the best care of myself eating-wise, I can get well-rounded healthy meals with fruit and vegetables.

I have a special place in my heart for Holy Apostles—and a deep appreciation. And so I thank all of you there. And I thank all who eat there—my brothers and sisters—for their lives and humanity.

Well, I guess that's all—I hope you have a wonderful celebration and a wonderful next 25 years if the need continues.

Peace. [signed] Ann.

I would ask your prayers and thanksgivings for Ann, and your prayers for all God's children who are hungry and homeless our City. Pray for them on this day, and remember to pray for them in the cold days that are coming. And please also pray for those parishes and programs which seek to serve them in your name, and in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.