



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE

in the City of New York

The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector

www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, September 13, 2020

Patronal Feast of Saint Thomas

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Andrew St. John, *Bishop in Residence*

on

Habakkuk 2:1-4, Hebrews 10:35–11:1, and John 20:24-29

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The Feast of Saint Thomas (transferred)

Jesus said to Thomas: “Do not doubt but believe.” Poor old doubting Thomas. He has been stuck with that title ever since. Let us think about doubt for a moment.

In 2005 I had the pleasure of seeing “Doubt: a parable”, play by John Patrick Shanley, in a wonderful production on Broadway by Doug Hughes, starring memorably Cherry Jones as Mother Aloysius and Brian O’Byrne as Father Flynn. The production not surprisingly won a raft of Tonys. Later the play became a film simply titled “Doubt” starring Meryl Streep and the late great Philip Seymour Hoffman in the principal roles. Set in a Catholic grade school in Brooklyn the story revolves around the complex and destructive relationship between Mother Aloysius, the school Principal, a rather conservative, older woman and the parish priest, Father Flynn who is younger and handsome and somewhat more liberal in his attitudes. Doubt is sewn into the relationship when Mother Aloysius questions the propriety of Father Flynn’s dealings with a young vulnerable black pupil with whom he has met privately. That doubt acts like a cancer and leads to Mother Aloysius making unfounded allegations about previous conduct around kids by Father Flynn in former parishes. Was she acting out of jealousy or vindictiveness or simply motivated by concern for the boy? Was Father Flynn taking inappropriate interest in the boy? Those questions and doubts about character are not resolved. Mother Aloysius’ attempted character assassination fails both when she questions the boy’s mother, who reveals how grateful she is for Fr. Flynn’s interest in her boy who has been a subject of bullying, and also when Father Flynn is given a promotion and leaves the parish. But the doubts remain with the audience around both characters. It does not take much for us to doubt the veracity of a person or a piece of news especially in these days of fake and manipulated news. Thinking about Thomas: “Thomas was not with them when Jesus came”. Put yourself in Thomas’ shoes. You return to a group of friends and family who are all excited about some experience they have shared but which you missed out on. As they enthuse you may find feelings of resentment or jealousy bubbling up within you. Why them and not me? Why wasn’t I there? Thomas by his absence had missed the Risen Lord’s commissioning of the disciples and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Thomas had been left out. Not that we are told where Thomas was the week before when Jesus came the first time. Perhaps Thomas was out and about looking after the grieving women disciples or distributing food to the poor while the other disciples cowered behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish authorities. This is all speculation. But it may help us to understand Thomas’ famous outburst: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side I will not believe.” He needed to know first-hand. Indeed, Thomas’ impulsive reaction is not out of character with his other recorded statements in John’s gospel. “Let us also go, that we may die with him,” says Thomas on hearing of Lazarus’ death in John 11. And in John 14: “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can

we know the way?” Thomas is not one to hold back or to remain silent. He appears to be more like Peter in his active, assertive, eager self.

But historically Thomas’ doubts have been linked to the more serious matter of religious doubt; doubt which is contrasted with faith, the very opposite of faith. In more fundamentalist or conservative catholic circles such doubts were treated as sinful; as letting down the side of faith; as dangerously negative and unproductive. But that approach is not true to life. Rather than the opposite of faith, doubt can be seen as the obverse of the same coin, the coin of faith as it were. Doubts while unsettling and challenging to faith can also lead to a deeper more mature faith, a faith more honed by experience. I have always taken comfort from the response of the father of the boy with the evil spirit to Jesus’ questioning in Mark 9:24, “I believe, help my unbelief.” I suspect many of us if we are honest identify with that.

I have just been reading Richard Holloway’s latest book, one of a series in which he explores his very serious doubts about faith and religion. Richard Holloway resigned as Bishop of Edinburgh, and Primus of the Episcopal Church of Scotland some nearly twenty years ago. His resignation was not due to age or infirmity but rather to a crisis of faith. I first met Richard Holloway when he was the darling of Anglican Catholic Renewal movement back in the early Eighties. In those days he was Rector of the Advent, Boston. By the time I caught up with him at the 1998 Lambeth Conference, Bishop Richard, as he had become, was taking a much more liberal approach to the issues around gender and sexuality than he had previously. He is a brilliant preacher and writer and is hugely read in theology, philosophy and literature. He has written a number of books about his search for meaning since his resignation. One called “Leaving Alexandria” I found quite depressing. There was a sense that he was a lost soul. The second I read “Waiting for the last bus” was more hopeful in its approach to the issues of ageing and coming to terms with not being able to answer all life’s questions.

In the latest volume published this year, “Stories we tell ourselves,” he admits that he is back attending mass again at Old St Paul’s in Edinburgh (where he was once Rector) in spite of his ongoing intellectual struggles. In this book Holloway deals with great crises of faith in history such as those brought on by Darwin’s Origins of the Species in the 19th Century or the First World War or the Holocaust in the 20th century. He also addresses the most difficult question of suffering. Why do the innocent continue to suffer? He explores the Book of Job which we are reading at daily Morning Prayer at present which addresses the issue of suffering head on. Once again without revisiting the whole of Job, you will remember that Job’s suffering came about as a result of a wager between Satan and God to see if his suffering would cause the good man Job to curse God. We learn of Job’s terrible sufferings, losing his family and property as well as enduring disease and discomfort. All this causes Job to question whether life itself is worth living but never does he curse God. There follows much commentary by Job and his so called friends, trying to rationalize his suffering. In the end the reader is not given any easy answer except that Job recognizes that through it all God is still creator and maker of all things and that he is able to say: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” Job is given his “Aha” moment when he sees as it were for the first time. It is that sort of moment I see happening for Thomas when he encounters the Risen Christ, wounds and all. It is similar to Paul’s experience on the Damascus Road when his life was turned upside down. All Thomas can do is make the greatest statement of faith, the crowning point of John’s gospel, “My Lord and my God.” Thomas for all his humanness, his doubts and misgivings, becomes the agent of faith in the Risen Lord. Thomas makes that “leap of faith” committing his whole life to follow Christ his Lord in his case even unto death. That does not mean his life would be doubt free. After all, like us he had an intellect and mind of his own with which to think, to question and to doubt. That is what makes us human. However what Thomas like Paul and Job realize is that all our doubts and questions, as well as our moments of insight and inspiration are experienced in the context of a living and loving God in whom lies the ultimate resolution of all things. Thomas’ insight of faith then gives rise to Jesus final Beatitude: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” And that includes you and me. Thank God for Thomas and all the saints who aid and inspire us in the journey of faith. Amen