



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**August 15, 2021**  
*The Feast of Saint Mary the Virgin*

*Solemn Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng

*on*

Revelation 11:19;12:1-6, 10, 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, and Luke 1:39-56

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### **A Sign of Hope**

Growing up in the Roman Catholic Church, I recognized the importance of the Virgin Mary at an early age. Like a good Catholic boy, I learned how to say the rosary. I recited the Hail Mary as penance after going to confession.

One of my earliest spiritual memories was looking at a small replica of Michelangelo's "Pietà" in our living room and thinking about the depth of Mary's grief and love for her crucified son. My late grandfather had given this statuette to my mother after he visited the Vatican in the mid-1950s. It now sits on one of the bookshelves in my study. You may have spotted it during one of our Zoom classes.

To this day, I still find comfort in praying to the Virgin Mary – especially during the times when I find myself in a spiritual desert or experiencing the dark night of the soul. As my Franciscan spiritual director once reminded me, "Mary loves her children."

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As good Anglo-Catholics, I suspect that most of us who worship at Saint Thomas recognize how important the Virgin Mary is to our spiritual lives. We are, after all, greeted by the statue of Our Lady of Fifth Avenue whenever we enter the nave. Mary is, in the words of Psalm 45, the "King's daughter" who is "all glorious within."

But Our Lady of Fifth Avenue is not the only manifestation of the Virgin Mary that speaks to us and nourishes our souls.

Some of you might have seen a powerful icon of the Virgin Mary that was commissioned by Fr. Mark Bozzuti-Jones, a priest at Trinity Church Wall Street, after the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. The icon is called "Our Lady, Mother of Ferguson and All Those Killed by Gun Violence."

The icon is written (that is, painted) in the traditional Byzantine style, and it depicts Mary as a Black Madonna with her hands up in both an *orans* and a "hands up, don't shoot" position. In front of her is a small black silhouette of a young Jesus, also with his hands up, in the crosshairs of a gun.

For me, this icon highlights the spiritual underpinnings of the Black Lives Matter movement and the moral imperative of countering the horrific rise of white supremacy in our country during the past few years.

There is another powerful depiction of the Virgin Mary by the Swedish photographer Elisabeth Ohlson Wallin. The depiction is a photo that was part of a 1998 art exhibit called “*Ecce Homo*.” It shows Mary as a nurse sitting in an AIDS ward. She wears a flowing robe made out of green hospital scrubs, and she is cradling a dying man – who is emaciated and connected to an IV drip bag – in the traditional pietà position.

Both the icon of Our Lady of Ferguson and the photo of the AIDS pietà are powerful reminders of how the Virgin Mary can be a source of comfort and healing during the most painful times in our lives. Mary has experienced unfathomable heartbreak herself, and so she understands our pain. We are never alone in our suffering.

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We Episcopalians have a unique theological understanding of St. Mary the Virgin. It is a blend of both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed perspectives.

On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church has declared that certain Marian doctrines, such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, are dogmas, or infallible teachings of the church – which must be believed by all the faithful.

On the other hand, our more Calvinist siblings in the Body of Christ view such doctrines as unbiblical. They also contend that such doctrines detract, or take away from, the unique role that Jesus Christ plays in salvation history. For them, the Marian doctrines violate the Reformation principles of *sola scriptura* (that is, “scripture alone”) as well as *solus Christus* (that is, “Christ alone”).

Not surprisingly, we Episcopalians occupy the middle space between these two binary positions. Although the Anglican tradition has never held that the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption are dogmas of the church, we do recognize Mary as a “faithful disciple” who is “fully present with God in Christ.” As such, Mary is a “sign of hope for all humanity.”

The readings appointed for today’s feast day support this view. In our first reading, we hear about the woman in heaven who is “clothed with the sun” and who gives birth to a son “who is to rule all the nations.” Since patristic times, many theologians have interpreted this image from the Book of Revelation as referring to the Virgin Mary. This in turn demonstrates that she is “fully present” with God in Christ.

Our epistle reading reminds us that Mary is a “sign of hope” for all of humanity. St. Paul teaches us in his First Letter to the Corinthians that the risen Christ is the “first fruits” of all those who have died. But St. Paul also reminds us that others will also be “made alive in Christ.” That is, they will be resurrected in their “own order.”

To the extent that the Virgin Mary is the New Eve – and to the extent that she completes the reversal of the Fall and overcomes the corrosive effects of original sin – she gives all of us the hope that we, too, will one day experience the bodily resurrection and return home from exile.

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I love the fact that the gospel reading for today’s feast day is the Magnificat from St. Luke’s gospel. The Magnificat is the revolutionary song of praise that Mary sings when she visits her cousin Elizabeth while they are both pregnant – Elizabeth with John the Baptist, and Mary with Jesus.

The Magnificat should be a familiar text to many of you, as it is recited during evening prayer and sung during evensong. Despite how well-known it is, I never cease to be surprised at just how radical the Magnificat is. In the canticle, Mary testifies about how God is the one who turns the world's values upside down. God lifts up the lowly, while the proud are scattered and the powerful are brought down from their thrones. God fills the hungry with good things, while the rich are sent away empty.

Most importantly, Mary recognizes that God has done great things for her, despite – or perhaps because of – her lowly status. Mary is neither rich nor famous nor powerful. In fact, she describes herself as a mere handmaiden or servant of God. And yet, she is the means by which God changes the entire course of salvation history.

The point of the Magnificat is this. God works in radical and unexpected ways. God looks with favor upon those who are at the margins, and not in the center. This is what the icon of Our Lady of Ferguson and the photo of the AIDS pieta teaches us. As foolish as it might seem, God *does* lift up the lowly, and God *does* fill the hungry with good things.

Mary, for us, is a sign of hope.

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As many of you know, today is the last day of my current role as your Theologian in Residence. What a two years it's been! When I started in this role in the fall of 2019, I would never have imagined that – a little over six months later – the world would be turned upside down due to a full-blown pandemic.

As challenging as COVID-times ministry has been, it's been an important reminder that God uses the unexpected to carry out God's purposes – just as God called an unmarried and pregnant young woman on the outskirts of the Roman Empire to change the course of salvation history.

Thanks to God's grace, we have not only maintained the parish's adult education and formation ministry during the past 17 months, but we have seen it grow and flourish in unexpected ways.

We have reached people from all around the world during these challenging times, from Shanghai to Switzerland, and from Manhattan to Mumbai. And we have created an entire library of video recordings on topics ranging from biblical studies to church history to systematic theology to spiritual practices.

And for that I am deeply grateful.

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Towards the end of today's liturgy, the altar party will process to the shrine of Our Lady of Fifth Avenue for prayers and intercessions.

I invite you to take a few moments after mass to visit the shrine yourself. Bring your prayers to St. Mary the Virgin. Bring your joys and your sorrows and your hopes to the Mother of God. Reflect upon the fact that she understands you and that you are never truly alone.

Think about the icon of Our Lady of Ferguson as well as the AIDS pieta, and reflect upon where else you might see Mary, the Mother of God, present in the suffering of the world. Pray especially for the Diocese of Haiti, which experienced another devastating earthquake yesterday.

Most of all, on this Feast Day of St. Mary the Virgin, give thanks to how Our Lady changed the course of salvation history by saying "yes" to God. Mary is a sign of hope for all of us. And, for that, we say "Amen."