

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 12, 2023

The Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany (Sexagesima)

Festal Evensong

4 p.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministry and School Chaplain*

on

Revelation 4:1-11

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Come up hither

After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. (Revelation 4:1)

In his book “Nature, Man and God,” Archbishop William Temple gave what must probably be one of the most inspirational explanations of what worship is; he said:

“Worship is the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of mind with his truth; the purifying of the imagination by his beauty; the opening of the heart to his love, the surrender of will to his purpose — and all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.”

Though, how far from this ideal can our experience of worship be!

I wonder, How do we prepare for the kind of worship that is an encounter with the glory of God who, as we read in the Book of Revelation, “art worthy, to receive glory and honor and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created?”(Revelation 4:11)

In spite of our poor and inadequate ways to enter into the kind of worship of God that Archbishop Temple described, I am also sure that all of us can recollect times when we have glimpsed Gods glory; a deep sense of hope and of heaven, and in response to the invitation that we heard in our second lesson: *Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter.*

In responding to this call to *Come up hither*, John the Divine encountered the glory of God; the praises of the one enthroned; the unfathomable, holy, and Almighty God who brought the Angels and Elders to their knees in adoration. So, worship is not about what I intend to do, but rather, responding to the call of God. And to truly worship is to discover humility; as Temple said, *“all this gathered up in adoration, the most selfless emotion of which our nature is capable.”*

Worship, then is part of the calling to be fully human – to recognize God’s image in yourself, myself and to respond to the Creator with selfless adoration – the opposite of self-aggrandizement that our society encourages.

Brother of Roger of Taizé once said, something like this, “Worship isn’t an optional extra, something we do only because we feel it, but because God *desires* it; the God who gives us life and in whose image we are loved

and made. Participating in Worship isn't a source of negotiation, or bargaining, it's God calling us into being with him and not about giving worth to me, but me giving worth, worship to God."

After all, that is what the old English word worship means – giving something worthy to another – *worth-ship*.

And as we hear in Archbishop's Cranmer's beautiful prayer before Holy Communion, a prayer we traditionally call 'The Prayer of Humble Access', worship is not to be a self-edifying endeavor, but one that calls for us to give of our whole self, body mind and spirit, with humility, **"that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us."**

Worship is, therefore, not intended simply to be a place set apart. Neither is it intended as a means of escape from the doldrums of everyday life in order to enter another world, as if through C.S. Lewis' secret door to Narnia. Rather, worship allows us in real time and in real places to glimpse the Divine or, as Orthodox Christians teach, for heaven and earth to touch.

True worship, therefore, is a threshold where the the glory of heaven is not simply glimpsed from afar, but encountered.

Thresholds, gates, and doorways are prominent images and metaphors throughout scripture, and notably in the book of revelation. Similarly, in our churches and sacred spaces, they are not just of architectural merit, or even functional but, like those same images in scripture, they are also symbolic of a connection between the human and divine; between earth and heaven. We cross thresholds, and through doorways into Church in the same spirit that Saint John the Divine saw an open door in heaven and the invitation to cross the threshold. In the preceding Chapter to today's reading, the image of the door as a path to the heart is also explored.

When I was very young, in the 1970's, one of most memorable services I ever attended was in St Paul's Cathedral in London, and drew me to a very special painting. An image painted in 1904, which is the third, and some say the most significant, version of a painting by William Holman Hunt. Hunt's painting is titled 'The Light of the World,' and some would say is one of the most viewed 20th-century art pieces in the world.



The Light of the World.
William Holman Hunt, 1827-1910.

In the painting, Jesus stands outside a door that is faintly lit by a lantern he is holding in his hand. He is knocking on the door. This allegorical image contains many layers of meaning, and has been described as a "sermon in a frame," but when I first saw it as a child, what was most startling was the fact that the door has no handle on the outside. Jesus was standing at the door, knocking, but he needed someone on the other side of the door to actually open it.

I wonder, How open is the door of your heart to glimpse heaven, and participate in the call to come hither and enter into worship with true

selfless adoration?

As we approach Lent may we all respond to invitation to *Come up hither* and invite others to do the same. May we all be prepared to encounter true wonder, love and praise, not only in what we sing with our lips but what we believe in hearts and show forth in our lives.

I conclude with a prayer by Bishop Thomas Ken who died in 1711:

O God, make the door of this house wide enough
to receive all who need human love and fellowship,
but narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and malice.
Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling-block to children,
nor to straying feet,
but strong enough to turn away the power of evil.
God, make the door of this house the gateway to thine eternal kingdom.
Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Bishop Thomas Ken (1637-1711)