

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, April 28, 2024
The Fifth Sunday Of Easter

Festal Evensong
4:00 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*

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A church alive and life-giving



“He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev 3:6)



As with many other professions, theologians too have their ‘societies’ and meet periodically to share the result of their research, engage in conversations with each other, listen to new voices and ideas. I have just come back from the meeting of the Society for the Study of Theology which gathers in Warwick, near Coventry, in the UK every year in April. The SST as it is known, is a vibrant community, mainly Anglican (although open to all denominations), devoted to identifying and discussing themes and questions which call for theological engagement – and to foster intellectual integrity in academy, church and other areas of public life. The theme of the conference this year was prayer and I gave a paper on the relation between Christian contemplative tradition and mindfulness, a theme I have been working on for a while now and hopefully will become a book soon.

I have been to many meetings of this kind. Sometimes their sheer size can be overwhelming: hundreds, if not thousands of participants, countless presentations, plenaries, workshops. One has to be selective, focus on few topics, and make sure to find time to have meaningful one-to-one conversations with as many colleagues as possible. This personal acquaintance is invaluable for my job here at Saint Thomas when I need to find guest speakers for our theology lectures and programs who I can trust to be good communicators, sound thinkers, pastorally and spiritually oriented.

Over the years, and especially on this last occasion at the SST, I found that conferences of theologians can be a way of responding to the refrain of the book of Revelation we have just heard: “He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev 3:6). Not that theologians know more than others in the church how to listen to the Spirit – far from it. It is true though that the life of the church needs the work of theologians who responsibly and humbly engage in reflecting, questioning, and thinking. I find immensely promising that among his first initiatives, our new bishop Matt Heyd has gathered an Advisory Theology Committee to help him and the whole diocese to reflect on faith formation, reconciliation, and healing – and I feel immensely blessed to have been asked to be part of it.

In the everyday lives of our churches, as in any other organization, there always is the risk of getting so caught up in administration, logistics, organization, planning and the like that almost no time nor energy is left for making sure we are doing more than simply 'functioning'.

If we believe the words of the book of Revelation we have just heard, this has been a problem since the beginning of Christianity. Imagine being the Church of Sardis and the recipient of this harsh admonition:

I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

The book of Revelation can be quite blunt and unforgiving. And yet, it is also encouraging and comforting as with the Church of Philadelphia:

Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

Whether to scold, reproach, or hearten, the earnest plea the book of Revelation addresses to each and every church is one of my favourite sentences in the whole Scripture:

He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

How can we be sure that we truly listen to the Spirit though? How does the Spirit help us to discern where we are now and what to do next? We all know that there is no easy answer to these questions – and this often explains why even in the life of our churches we feel much more inclined to opt for the apparent safety and dependability of bureaucracy and regulations. Any responsible organization needs a level of these of course – but we know all too well how easily procedural reflexes can grow out of proportion and end up leaving no space nor energy for imagination – and thus we lose the ability to hear what the Spirit is saying to us. And without this, as Revelation says, our churches might look alive, but in fact they are dead.

So, indeed there is no infallible method to make sure that we keep listening and responding to the promptings of the Spirit and yet we know what surely helps: make sure that we step back periodically from our everyday routines and systems, slow down, take some distance, and especially actively listen to people from outside the organization we are part of, engage in serious thinking and conversations with them, let ourselves to be challenged by them.

In this respect, theology plays a crucial role in the lives of our churches – and particularly in our community here at Saint Thomas. Theology does not have the answers but tries to ask the right questions, broaden the horizon, make sure that we do not lose sight of the larger picture. This is why it is essential for our theology programme to constantly introduce new voices from outside – just to give a couple of examples, among the 20 or so guest speakers we had over the past year, many of us were deeply inspired by the conversation on Community Church in a Digital Age with Sam Wells, the vicar of our twin London parish of Saint Martin-in-the-fields – not to mention the dazzling reflection on the role of Saint Thomas in the life of the nation delivered by Jon Meacham few months ago.

Coming soon we will have another promising exercise in listening to what the Spirit might want to say to us at Saint Thomas with the symposium on Communities of Faith and Civil Society: Modalities of

Engagement – as part of our celebration for the Bicentennial of Saint Thomas. Allow me to mention few reasons why the symposium can become a way of yielding to the invitation of Revelation.

- First I would say the occasion: the Bicentennial has made all of us more aware of the treasure entrusted to us, it has helped us to revisit our history and see how one of the secrets of the increasing prominence of Saint Thomas in the life of Manhattan has been not so much wealth but the ability to respond decisively to the bewildering change in circumstances and challenges over the past two hundred years. Our worship has evolved enormously over the decades, our community has responded with energy and generosity to social, political and ecclesial upheavals. The purpose of this year of celebrations has always been to make us more deeply aware of our identity so as to discern more clearly where we should go next.
- Then the topic: inscribed in the vision of Saint Thomas is a vow “to make a difference to midtown Manhattan by being a vibrant community of faith where all can feel at home”. The symposium will give us the opportunity to reflect on how we can truly honor this vocation in cooperation with our neighbouring churches and communities of faith.
- Finally the speakers: We will have five inspiring theologians and excellent communicators who are deeply involved in Christian social and charitable outreach in the USA and in the UK and an exceptional contribution from the Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, who will be visiting our parish that week.

Here we circle back to what I was saying earlier about the role of theology in the life of our parish: help us to be more informed, more intentional, more critical.

The words I quoted earlier which Revelation addresses to the Church of Philadelphia should speak to us now:

Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut.

The Spirit is intent in keeping open the doors of our hearts, our minds, and our lives, – it is up to us to make sure that we are intentional about listening, discerning, and acting in such a way as not just to have “the reputation of being alive” , but to be really, fully alive, and life-giving.
