

A Easter 05
2011 May 22 St Michaels Studio City
On The Propers 1 Peter 2.1-20 John 14.1-14

Baptismal Sermon For Thomas Woodruff Dunning
The Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 22d, 2011

Well, Thomas, we want to apologize to you for what we're going to do to you this morning, baptizing you into the Christian community in the name of the Triune God, giving you living water to drink for the rest of your life. There are many benefits, but there are drawbacks as well. We are putting you at odds with your neighbor, your fellow citizen in this great nation, your friend in times to come. The Christian community commits a profoundly counter cultural act when it baptizes a human being into the Church, the Mystical Body of the resurrected Christ, the people of Christ serving the world in His Name and for His purposes.

Our culture will tell you that you must put yourself first, that no one else will look out for your welfare. Our religion says that you must put God first, and everything else will fall into place.

Our culture says the only reasonable way to live is selfishly; our religions says nonsense, the only way to live is altruistically, with a great devotion to the welfare of others.

Our culture will offer you several choices for what to do with your life: make money, be famous, take pleasure, have sex, create a family, serve your country, a myriad of others. Our religion will tell you, as it has told us for thousands of years, that your purpose in life is to learn how to love, to become the image of our loving God as we see Him living a passionately loving human life in Jesus of Nazareth.

Our culture will fawn on you for many reasons: you are handsome, you are smart, you are funny, you are powerful, you are talented. Our religion will stand in awe of you because you are a creature of God, a child of heaven, a brother to the Messiah who rules and serves the universe, one destined to live forever with God in joy.

Our culture will tell you that your religion is a relic of a superstitious past, best put aside in the interest of being a clear-eyed realist. Our religion will tell you that our culture is blind to the realities that make life really worthwhile, to dimensions of the truth that are closer to the core of humanity because they bring us into the heart of God, who is the sustainer of all that is.

Our culture will worship what is modern and new, ignoring the past as out-of-date and irrelevant. Our religion will be fascinated by what is novel in God's world but will always look to the past to provide a context into which to fit what is new. Dead white men and women have a lot to say to us that is wise and important.

Our culture sees and hears only what is loud and fast; our religion says that in quietness and stillness we will find life's heartbeat and a tempered balance that will make us wise.

Our culture will tell you that you needn't work hard, that life owes you. Our religion will face you with the hard truth that we are guaranteed nothing but the infinite love of God which takes a lifetime of attention and engagement to understand.

Our culture will tell you that you must devote yourself to self-fulfillment; our religion will tell you that becoming holy is the only goal worthy of you. To be holy, that is, to become good and wise and compassionate and loving, as God is.

Our culture will offer you nothing permanent to live for, because death is the end of this world of space and time; our religion will ask, invite, cajole and demand that you respond to God and become Her ally in re-making the world, for life transcends death and we are made to inherit a world beyond this world. What we do in our lives has infinite meaning, because the people we live with and do things with and do things to – these people live forever.

Our religion will offer you sacrifice as a theme to live your life by, the sacrifice we keep before us in the image of the crucified Lord of life, the willing giving of ourselves for others, because God returns all that matters to us in resurrection; our culture simply does not comprehend sacrifice.

Thomas, you begin to see the dimensions of what we are doing to you today. We apologize for that, and, at the same time, we are profoundly joyful, for we think we are giving you a great treasure, bringing you into a powerful tradition, imprinting the very likeness of God into your soul, and giving you a community to live in that takes compassion and love and holiness seriously. It is the best thing we have to offer you.

We're not making this up, Thomas. It is all there in the story of God's history with us that is the Bible, in the history of our people living with God through centuries, in the way we think and love with God's Spirit in our own lives.

You are being baptized in the church season of Easter, when we grapple with the meaning of a dead human being brought back to life by the love of God and what that resurrected life means. That resurrected man, Jesus, tells us God is not hidden from us but that we can see and hear God as we see and hear Jesus, that God is like a loving Father who wants only the best for His children. In the human life of Jesus we see the divine life of God. (John 14.1-14) That is why we Christians hold on so strongly to Jesus: He makes God real for us. You carry the name of a great saint, Thomas, who had his doubts about this resurrection business but who came to believe and accept what God is doing in Jesus Christ. (John 20.24-29) You will have your doubts, too, but trust yourself to your patron saint, whose example of humble acceptance can guide your life. Do the same, Thomas.

A follower of the great high priest, Jesus Christ, in a sermon for baptism that we today call the New Testament book of *First Peter* says that you are chosen and special. This thinker says that the Christian people to whom you now belong are priests, royalty, and a holy nation. You,

along with us, are to turn darkness into light, to tell the nobodies of the world that they are somebodies, transformed into God's people, the most precious thing on the planet, that there is always compassion and understanding and kindness, that we have already found out how good the Lord is and now we must tell others, that we are builders and healers and beauty-makers in God's kingdom. (1 Peter 2.1-10) Do the same, Thomas.

As you grow up, you will learn what it is to be a people, a community, a nation, even to be a king. But being a priest is a little strange in the modern world, so let me take a moment to tell you what that is all about. A priest is simply a bridge to help people get to God; a priest is not a doorway that limits divine access; a priest is a bridge open 24/7 for folks to travel to the wonder that is our God. In the story of God's people that is the Bible, you will learn that God appointed the first high priest, a man named Aaron, brother to an exceptional leader, Moses. Aaron's task was to help the people to realize God's presence in their lives and to come close to God, to make their whole lives a worship of God's graciousness. We Christians see Jesus Christ as the inheritor of that task, the one, perfect High Priest who accomplished the union of God with His people. Do the same thing, Thomas. Be a priest, as all baptized Christians are, to bring the world's people to the God who loves them passionately. Help them to see that they are one with the Divine. It is a worthy lifetime calling for you, as it was for Moses' brother and for Jesus. Let people see in you the divine reality breaking into this world and a life enriched beyond telling by that Divinity.

God binds Himself to Her people in an agreement we call covenant. By that covenant God liberates His people, rescues them from lostness, gives them a place and people to belong to, protects them, and calls for them to obey and worship and love. (Deuteronomy 6.20-25) Today you become a part of that covenant. Help others to do the same, Thomas.

I want to close by giving you a prayer by another Thomas, Dylan Thomas, a great poet of the last century. He wrote a verse play about an imaginary Welsh village called Milk Wood. One of the characters is the local pastor, the reverend Eli Jenkins, who recites his prayer/poem in the twilight. It's a good one to use all your life. Here it is:

Every morning when I wake,
Dear Lord, a little prayer I make,
O please to keep Thy lovely eye
On all poor creatures born to die.

And every evening at sun-down
I ask a blessing on the town
For whether we last the night or no
I'm sure is always touch-and-go.
We are not wholly bad or good
Who live our lives under Milk Wood,
And Thou, I know, wilt be the first
To see our best side, not our worst.

O let us see another day!
Bless us this night, I pray,
And to the sun we all will bow
And say good-bye – but just for now!

(Dylan Thomas, Under Milk Wood, 1954)

So much to do and be. A lifetime of work and transformation. Quiet and stillness and noise and tumult and work and sacrifice. Sadness and joy. Culture and counter culture. God and Jesus. Doubt and faith. Life and death and life again.

We apologize, Master Thomas, for what we do today. But we also rejoice. Amen.