

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 17-B (29 August 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2021-08-28 Sat 19:08>*

## **Collect**

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.

*Song of Solomon 2:8-13, Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23*

## **1 Covid**

This week, we at St. Thomas' have joined the ranks of other parishes in our Diocese who have once again closed our buildings due to a disturbing rise in the "daily new cases" of Covid-19 in Gloucester County. In fact, most of South Jersey is suffering terribly: Cape May has the highest number of daily new cases in the state. This is why we're strongly encouraging the wearing of masks – even outdoors.

This summer I hoped things were finishing up for us and Covid. We were removing our masks, sitting closer together, even shaking hands again. Then in July the warnings came back, disrupting our plans to see family on our travels. Then the masks for inside. And here we are in August – August! – closing our church buildings again before school even starts!

So all this leaves me sad and anxious. Also angry. And sometimes a little despondent. What I need in a time like this is a word from the Lord.

From our first reading we hear this:

Arise, my love, my fair one,  
and come away;  
for now the winter is past,  
the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land.

The fig tree puts forth its figs,  
and the vines are in blossom;  
they give forth fragrance.

Arise, my love, my fair one,

and come away.<sup>1</sup>

From the winter of Covid, distancing, and anxiety: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

This isn't a call to deny Covid's reality. But it is a call to deny Covid's centrality. We can deal with covid, we can get vaccinated and wear masks and follow protocols. But this is a call to keep our eyes on Jesus, to seek first God's Kingdom, to get vaccinated not because we're afraid and we see it as a shield, but because we are bold to love our neighbors and we see the vaccine as a tool for doing exactly that. Even in our response to Covid, if we have eyes to see, we can find an opportunity to encounter God's embrace.

## 2 Purity

This word from our first reading is the same word we find in the Gospel. Some grumpy antagonists are questioning Jesus about a particular ritual which they observe and about which his disciples are, well, a little lax. This ritual is described as a “tradition of the elders.” The elders were those who practiced the faith in earlier times, whose good example lots of people still followed. Like how we say the creed handed down to us by the Councils of Nicea. Or use the Prayer Book designed by Thomas Cramner. Or adhere to the decisions of General Convention. These things are all good and useful when the point us toward God. But, like the hand-washing in our Gospel story, become corrupt and damaging when they're used to virtue-signal, separating *me* from *you* as better or more worthy.

Sometimes parishes within the Episcopal church are characterized as leaning more anglo-catholic, evangelical, or charismatic. Each of these styles has important things to teach us about God, and each of them meet different people at their place of spiritual need. When we confuse “different” and instead say “better,” we are invited to hear a word from the Lord who meets each one of us in our individuality: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

Sometimes even Christianity itself can become less of a practice or a relationship, a path that leads us toward God. Instead it can be corrupted into an identity, something that distinguishes *us* from *them* and seems to authorize us to look down on, belittle, or discriminate against others. Hear the Lord who created every living being sends this word: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

Sometimes the “tradition of the elders” we use to distinguish people from people is not religious at all. Sometimes it is about class. Class can be encoded by the size of your house, or whether you have place to live at all, Sometimes class is demonstrated by your car or your job or your level of education. Wealth is the big, universal signifier of class. From whatever measure of class we might be tempted to apply to someone else or to ourselves, the Lord sends this word, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

Last year was a big, divisive election year, and partisan politics continue to arouse tempers and anxieties in much of our country. From the chaos and obfuscation of partisan politics, the Lord sends this word: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

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<sup>1</sup>Song of Songs 2.10b–13 NRSV.

Race continues to be a huge determining factor in how one is treated and in life outcomes throughout our country. Xenophobia has reared its ugly head and both immigrants and peoples with deep histories in this land have suffered as a result. From discrimination according to color or accent or national origin, the Lord sends this word, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

From the hurt places inside each of us; from each person’s own unique pain, fear, anxiety, and despair, the Lord sends us this word: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

Sometimes we like to talk about salvation. That’s the point of religion: finding connection with God. Salvation, being saved, is to be met in the midst of a hard place by the mercy of the Lord who says, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

### **3 Pure Religion**

In our epistle reading, James says that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”<sup>2</sup> We practice pure religion by making common cause with those who are disregarded or denigrated by everyone else. We saw the face of God as we served families through Kitchen of Hope yesterday and IHN a few weeks ago. We care for what God cares about when we give to Episcopal Community Services, funding initiatives that express God’s passion for our neighbors throughout the Diocese of New Jersey. We discover God as we turn our face and our hospitality toward Rowan University, toward thousands of students flooding into our town this very weekend, asking what is life all about. To all of these the Lord sends a word and, if we will allow it, the Lord may choose to send this word through us: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

Like a baby learning to smile and love by imitating its mother, like a couple growing old together and discovering a comfortable blending of their shared habits and expressions: so also we learn to love God by imitating God’s passion for the dignity of every human being. We pray, we worship, we serve in pursuit of a single end, which is to learn to answer God’s call: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.”

**Amen.**

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<sup>2</sup>James 1.27 NRSV.