

# ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Epiphany 4 (30 January 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

*Time-stamp: <2022-01-29 Sat 16:13>*

## **Collect**

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

*Jeremiah 1:4-10, 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30, Psalm 71:1-6*

## **1 I. A Funny Reception**

And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.<sup>1</sup>

When I arrive at St. Thomas', four years ago next week, I was greeted with a beautiful liturgy. The choir was singing, a new organ was being played, and the pews were packed as everybody turned out to see who this new priest would be! There was a special coffee hour afterwards, and somebody had gone out of their way to find out what all my favorite foods were and to make sure they were on the menu! It is humbling and encouraging to be the honored guest coming to town, especially in what was fast-becoming my new home.

Jesus, on the other hand, had a different kind of reception, didn't he? He was the hometown boy: everyone thought they knew him. He proclaimed to his neighbors a message of hope and expectation that everyone loved. But then something went wrong, and a mob tried to murder him. What happened? I think the issue was that Jesus challenged his neighbors' assumption that they had a special claim on him. Jesus wasn't going to dedicate his life and ministry to Nazareth: he was about God's mission, and God's mission was bigger than that.

## **2 II. 2021 at St. Thomas'**

In my written reflection in the Annual Report you received today, I begin by noting that for St. Thomas', 2021 was the year the pandemic *didn't* end. We all hoped it would. But even as our hopes faded into the harsh daylight of reality, we lived in faith. Actually, our faith had extra opportunity to come to expression, to be stretched and to grow, by the successive disappointments and frustrations and ambiguities of the year.

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<sup>1</sup>Lk 4.24-29

In faith, we continued to be the church even when public health directives, our Diocese, and our own best-effort interpretations of the news reports prevented us from doing nearly anything the way we were accustomed to doing it. In faith, we mailed in our pledges and offered extra seasonal gifts. In faith, the Bell Tower renovation was completed so that our bell once more announces to our neighbors, “we are praying for you!” In faith, Carl Kinsley conceived and executed a plan to connect all our buildings together with a local area network that would both allow services to be streamed from any of the buildings, and also *lower* our monthly costs! In faith, the kitchen was remodeled with new floors, new cabinets, new counters, new paint, and new outlets. In faith, Donna Freidel accessed a Diocesan grant to tear up and replace our cracked and uneven sidewalks. In faith we smoothed fields, found a donation of free gravel to re-surface our parking lot, and extended a concrete apron to make it easier for Kitchen of Hope to receive deliveries from pallet jacks straight into our storage space. In faith and without room in our budget, we contracted with a new cleaning service to help make our Parish Hall sparkle for the sake of hospitality. In faith, Tal Kramer recruited a talented Rowan music student to lead our choir and to bring new songs to our liturgies. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist I am awe-struck as I think about the prodigious number of people, from Altar Guild to Tuesday Night Crew, from Lectors to Acolytes, from Ushers to Camera Operators, organizers and recruiters, to all the people of God who together, all together, only together, make Eucharist. Together we en flesh the gift of God for the people of God.

It’s dangerous territory trying to mention specific names, because nearly everyone at St. Thomas’ participates in our ministry in important, practical ways. But I want to observe that in 2018, just days before I moved here from Seattle, Joe Rizzuto was elected Junior Warden of St. Thomas’. He has served faithfully and well in that capacity for the last four years, sometimes risking life and limb to do the maintenance tasks he was so passionate about. As he passes his office on to someone else, Joe leaves behind a church campus that is better lit, more safely wired, and with tiny electric bills. Only Joe had the vision, the faith, patience and *persistence* to find a vendor willing to install solar panels on the roof of the garage and the Parish Hall at **no cost** to St. Thomas’!

I am in awe of our Vestry, led by Senior Warden Eric Cephas, who have done amazing, unprecedented work in dealing with the closure of our church campus, the ups and downs of infection rates and Diocesan guidance, and all the other questions of health, ethics, love, and faith that come with a pandemic the likes of which none of us had ever experienced before. I am grateful to all of them.

St. Thomas’ was about God’s mission in 2021. This past year we all made great sacrifices to care for one another. We wore masks even when we didn’t want to. We showed up to read or serve in liturgy outdoors when it was cold or rainy or even threatening snow. Our Sunday School programs for children, youth, and adults, all adapted to the demands of this season by meeting mostly online, but occasionally offering special events or picnics together. Through Kitchen of Hope, St. Thomas’ doubled-down on our food distributions in order to care for our needy neighbors impacted by the pandemic. That’s what it means to be the Church.

And we weren’t just the Church- for ourselves. This year, St. Thomas’ continued to grow in our efforts to reach out to Rowan University. Rachael Owen has been key in helping organize those efforts. As Covid shut down our Dinner Church program, we looked for other ways to be present to students. From our Fall retreat at Camp Crossroads, to Church in the Woods, celebrating the Eucharist in public places on campus, to last fall’s weekly outdoor Compline & Pizza, we have continued to experiment with different ways to offer the love of God to our neighbors across the street. And not just across the street: I’ve been told Rowan is buying the Middle School across Delsea, meaning St. Thomas’ will now exist within a Rowan sandwich. I’m more convicted than ever that the mission field has come to us, that God is calling us to serve the community of Rowan University. These are our neighbors, the ones Jesus commanded us to love. As the Episcopal Church in Glassboro, we have both a responsibility to do the work of God and a golden opportunity to launch out in faith and grow into something

new. Rooted in our history and identity as St. Thomas', I think we are called to blossom with new life because that's how God works!

### **3 III. He slipped through their fingers**

This is the news that Jesus had for his neighbors. The mission of God was bigger than their community. Absolutely Jesus was there to proclaim good news to the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, and release from oppression. But the year of the Lord's favor was not something Nazareth could keep for themselves. And when they tried, says our Gospel lesson today, Jesus slipped right through their fingers and went on his merry way.

We at St. Thomas' have acted with great faith this year, continuing to move forward and to grow our charisms, our special gifts and callings from God. But like the people of Nazareth, we aren't called primarily to our own comfort and benefit. We are called to participate in God's mission to change the world. God's blessings have not been poured out upon us so we can soak in them like a Scrooge McDuck in his mountains of gold coins. Instead, God has entrusted us with a healthy parish, beautiful buildings, and amazing proximity to a dynamic university campus crying out for meaning, acceptance, and joy.

God's mission is bigger than St. Thomas'. This is good news, because it means we have room to keep growing. I am excited to see what God chooses to do with us, in us, and through us in 2022!