



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, OCTOBER 27, 2024
JEREMIAH 31:7-9; PSALM 126; HEBREWS 7:23-28; MARK 10:46-52

THE SPIRIT MOVES AT GROUND LEVEL

Mark 10:46–52 [Jesus and his disciples came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.]

The Spirit moves at ground level, which is where we live and move and have our being.

In many ways we have moved on from Covid, and there are many aspects of the pandemic that we would just as soon forget, but a delightful outcome from that lived experience is the Zoom-based practice of praying the Daily Office together—saying Morning and Evening Prayer each weekday. Before the pandemic a few would gather for Evening Prayer in the chapel. Now multiples of that number gather virtually, to pray and

be together, led by lay people who call the group into community in deeply meaningful ways. Try it sometime. The Spirit moves at ground level.

The happy truth is that Saint Mark's is not alone in this revival of ancient daily prayer in community. Many churches have discovered that offering virtual services of Morning and Evening Prayer means that more people near and far can find the connection in real time, marking their daily lives with intention and grace. The Spirit is moving at ground level.

Jesus, too, is at ground level in today's gospel, on the dusty road of Jericho when he hears, then sees Bartimaeus.

I am always gratified when the gospel gives us the name of the one encountering Jesus. Bart, Tim's son. There is a familiar invitation to see him as a real person engaging Jesus, not the object of our religious instruction.

Jesus stands still and listens to his cry for help, and turns to him, rather than walking on. He asks what do you want me to do for you? I want to see again, Jesus!

It is a heartfelt prayer born of grief and loss, and our hearts go to him with compassion, which is, I think, a tell-tale sign of the Spirit moving at ground level. Compassion moves us to inspired action in ways that connect us, one to another, with intention and grace.

It is with compassion that Jesus heals Bartimaeus. And I am convinced it is with compassion that Bartimaeus immediately follows Jesus on the way.

In Mark's gospel, this is the last encounter Jesus has before making his way to Jerusalem and to the week of his passion, his untimely death. Bartimaeus, perhaps more than others listening to Jesus teach, would have sharpened his sense of hearing to compensate for the loss of sight, and he was surely aware of the anticipatory sense of grief and loss that swirled in the dust on that road between Jericho and Jerusalem.

By week's end, everyone would have sensed it. What might it mean for us today?

One thing I've heard consistently in every meeting, every pastoral conversation, every chat with friends in recent days is that folks are on edge about the election. There is good reason for the anxiety, but I would like to suggest to you that beneath the anxiety is the reality of anticipatory grief. We are grieving because we have lost sight of something in this nation, we are in the midst of losing something, and time will tell how this loss is shaping our lives. We cannot control the macro-realities of our republic's woes by wishing it them away.

If we can do the spiritual work of plumbing the grief that surfaces as anxiety or anger or cynicism, then we might just find that our vocation of compassion has something to say in these challenging times. And remember, compassion means to suffer with. Opting out of the suffering is not possible if we are to follow Jesus. I know that's hard to hear. It's hard to see it, too.

Sam Wells is the priest at St. Martin's-in-the-Fields in London, across from Trafalgar Square and the British Museum, which is to say, an urban house of prayer by which thousands of souls walk every day. Prior to the pandemic, Sam said only a handful of people would drop in for the twice daily prayer services. Since the pandemic they've moved to holding Morning and Evening Prayer on Zoom, and the attendance has blossomed to scores of folks, far and near, who gather to pray as community.

But they still have the church doors open, and in the narthex, they've put up a corkboard on

which folks can drop in and write their prayer requests, and the church then incorporates those petitions into their Daily Office intercessions.

We have a similar process at Saint Mark's, using an email: prayers@saintmarks.org to which people can share their prayer requests. These inform our prayers each Sunday, and we share those petitions daily with more than 100 people on the Prayer Chain who commit them to their prayer lives every day. If you want to join that Prayer Chain, and join in holding others in prayer daily, just let one of the priests know.

My friend Sam Wells recently shared a few of the prayers that were left by anonymous souls on their narthex corkboard asking for the church's prayers:

"I'll be out begging tonight, Lord. Keep me safe," and,

"I miss my husband. I don't know how I'm going to live without him"

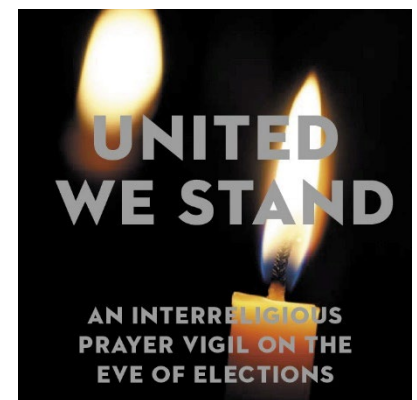
"For the baby I aborted: I love you despite never meeting you. I hope you're with me until I have the chance to explain why the timing wasn't right in person. Until then, I must let go."

Sam said he fell to his knees when he read the last one. Humbled and moved that she would entrust her heartfelt prayer to his church community, asking them to place her reality of grief and loss "at the altar of God's grace

and mercy," and to have compassion for her, with her.¹

Friends, this is what the church does! This is who we are! Our vocation of compassion is a tell-tale sign that the Spirit is moving at ground level, here and now.

Which is why we will host a special prayer vigil here on Monday Nov. 4, at 7pm, on the eve of the election, gathering the broader community—Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and many others—to hold the space for our grief, and our hope...our hope that we are still a constellation of souls offering good will and compassion to one another and



to the world in God's name, and that our prayers might help us orient to that vocation of compassion with courage and resolve. It is how we will find our way, with Jesus, and with each other.

The Spirit moves at ground level, here. It is holy ground made sacred by compassion which gives us eyes to see and ears to hear, and hearts to say to the world: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."² We will hold you and your prayers at the altar of God's grace and mercy.

¹ Sam Wells shared this reflection in an essay in *Christian Century*, November 2024 issue, pg. 35-36.

² The famous line from Emma Lazarus' famous poem, *The New Colossus*, which wraps the feet of the Statue of Liberty. Public domain.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL