



The  
Episcopal Diocese  
of New York

**Sermon of  
the Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche  
Bishop of New York  
at the  
Holy Tuesday Chrism Mass,  
with the Clergy Renewal of Ordination Vows**

The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine  
March 27, 2018

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Many ingenious lovely things are gone / that seemed sheer miracle to the multitude.” This is the opening line of one of my favorite poems by William Butler Yeats, and I found it fly into my mind last week when I opened the New York Times to see one of the great Heads of Easter Island on its side before a rising sea. It is a poem of disillusionment by the great Irish writer in the face of unassailable British power, who saw before him only the very undoing of public life and the end of possibility. His words became mine when I read that the ocean’s rising waters are lapping at the Easter Island Heads and threatening their survival. Now they will be lost in the great flood, or moved to higher ground where they were not born and do not belong, or safely cached in the sterile gallery of one of the world’s wonder cabinets, behind velvet ropes, where we may file by them while the voice in our earbuds tells us of mysteries and wonders and magic and miracles that once were in a place now gone, where these great stone faces stood lashed by storm and sun for over thirty centuries staring unblinking at the forbidding sea. But that was before the gods died. And I never even got to see them. We seem to be living in a time of cascading, shocking losses piling one atop another, that fill us with dread, with trepidation, and with some of Yeat’s same wariness before a future that may well be careening off the rails but into which we are nonetheless being flung pell mell.

For what would we trade the Easter Island Heads? The last polar bear? The Great Barrier Reef? The turning of the colors in a Northeastern Autumn? Or perhaps we would trade

them for the preservation of the rule of law. Or for dignity and respect across the political and cultural divide, or in the relations between men and women. Or black and white. Or money and want. Or no war. Or perhaps we would trade the Easter Island Heads for safe classrooms and the lives of children.

My Kindergarten-age grandson was watching the Olympics with his mother when they broke in with the story of the shooting at Parkland, so then that had to be explained to him. He is an ingenious lovely thing. For what would we trade his innocence?

And the thing is that these are real questions. The sudden unraveling of so much that we imagined we could take for granted, and the rising up of illegitimate and conscienceless authorities, and the sudden awakening of voices too long silent before unjust power is the story of our day. Do you understand what I mean when I say that the Prince of this World forever puts before us a Hobson's Choice? It means take it or leave it.

A whole lot of us went into the streets last Saturday to make our witness against the scourge of gun violence in America. Last year we joined the Women's March. And we have marched again and again to affirm the worth of Black Lives. As a people of a progressive mind, and as a people and leaders of the Christian faith, we are finding ourselves in confrontation with power in its rawest forms. Racist power and misogynist power, with all that violence and abuse of the innocent and the cheapening of human life. Warmongering power. Capitalism run amuck, riding the back of poor and ordinary people. Capitalism run amuck, riding the back of an exhausted and violated creation. The self-interested outrages of the President of the United States. The heartless choices of an indifferent Congress in service to an unfettered corporate interest. The prospect of thermonuclear war. These powers beset us from without and they rise up from within. Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God? Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God? Yes, Lord, today at least, I renounce them.

Whenever it is time to march I am always happy to march. But invariably I find myself made even hungrier for actions of greater meaning, and choices we might make that could effect an actual and real difference. The question for people of conscience and faith is how we are to have determination over our own lives and our community of communities and not be simply reactive to whatever new offense shouts at us from tomorrow's headlines, but be all the time brave and strong and faithful and most of all, constant. Not tossed to and fro. And how we are to be both convinced and convincing in our claim that the Gospel of Jesus Christ actually has the capacity to transform the world.

We pause in the midst of the Way of the Cross, this Holy Week stumbling sojourn with Jesus through Jerusalem toward Cross and Passion and Death and Resurrection - we pause in the breathing space between Palm Sunday and the Triduum - to recommit ourselves to the particular and unique vision of God that is Jesus Christ, and redouble our self-offering to our own life and ministry in his Name. We come back to our great and marvelous cathedral to renew our baptismal and ordination vows so that we may remember who we are. Because it is easy to forget, and there are voices which wish us well and voices which wish us woe forever seeking to confound us.

But we come today to remember that it is the vocation of Christians to be set apart in the world for a different calling. To live lives defined by a different creed and to a larger purpose. We have accepted the possibilities and costs of lives bound now by promises and vows and the obligations that go with them to be men and women of that particular kind of character which is shaped by the love of God for all people through our Savior Jesus Christ, and then to act like it. To be like Jesus. It starts in Baptism, that first choice. A choice made by us or by others on our behalf — (some of us enlisted in Christ's army and some of us were drafted) — but which marked us as Christ's own forever. Some who bore this mark were heaved into the mouths of lions. Some starved themselves to shame kings. Some disappeared into jungle and slum to give over all their days to dress the wounds of the dying and bury lost babies. Some placed their own bodies between the guns and the clubs and the firehoses of unjust power and the bodies of the poor oppressed. The glorious company of the apostles. The goodly fellowship of the prophets. The noble army of martyrs. Meek, merciful, mournful, poor in spirit, hungry for justice. Persecuted for righteousness' sake. To all who are drawn from the waters of baptism has been given now that legacy and that same charge. That when we see that they are building our crosses, to stride toward them with boldness and climb right on up.

But some of us accepted another call after Baptism. We were invited or beckoned or forced to take upon ourselves the additional responsibility - the burdens and the joys - of ordained ministry. That we might be set apart again, even from the congregation of the church. For the offering of the sacraments and the proclamation of the gospel. Deacons. Priests. Bishops. Each of us in our different callings has been given the charge to serve the people of God and to lead them. To us has been given the charge to unfold the gospel before our community, and to shape and direct and invite and support all of the people given into our care, all those folks in our pews aching to make a difference, wanting only to do some good in the day they have been given. That they may understand and embrace in full the Baptism they accepted, so that they may be the saints. The expectations on us are enormous. And when we said that we would accept responsibility for the spiritual lives of others there is no excuse for us when we do

not. This work demands everything we have, so we come back here on Holy Tuesday to re-up. To be strengthened by these sacraments and by the collegiality we share across our clericus, to be reminded of what matters and what doesn't. And to renew the promises and vows we once made. Some of you are in your sixth or seventh decade of ordained ministry. Some are in your third week. But for each of you there was a time when you first made the offering of your whole self, and you are before this altar now to say to one another, to your bishop, and to your Christ, that you still mean it.

In all times, but for us particularly in these times, the responsibility given to the whole company of the Baptized and to their ordained ministers must be, because we follow that Jesus before whose eyes was no outcast, to stand with and walk alongside, all the oppressed right here right now:

Women. I told someone in my office a few days ago that there is nothing being said in the MeToo stories of sexual harassment and abuse that I didn't know went on, but I had no idea the breadth and depth of it. We weren't listening, but now our eyes and our ears have been opened, and it must change us first if we hope to change the world.

Black people and brown people and Asian people and poor white people. Immigrants, especially the undocumented, and members of ethnic minorities. Moslems. Farmworkers. LGBT people and their families. When times are hard, they always fall hardest on these communities which are in America the perennially oppressed.

Schoolchildren, and all those who are made to live in the fear of the arbitrary and sudden inexplicable gun violence that wreaks death and destruction and lays everything to waste.

Scientists and philosophers and our own good earth. This beautiful Garden of Eden. If we wreck this one we won't be given another.

All of it, right now. We cannot say to Black Lives Matter that we have moved on to MeToo, or say to women that we are focusing on schoolchildren now, or say to schoolchildren that we're turning the page to Climate Change. All of these oppressions are facets of the same overweening illegitimate careening crushing abuse of power. One Lord One Faith One Baptism. And One Justice. Our solidarity with all of these people is the heart of the Christian life. But if we are to make ourselves so committed, it will require of us more than simply protest against injustice. More than marches. It requires of us first the conversion of our own hearts and the amendment of our own lives. The reform of our own institutions. The sacrifice of our own self interest. The laying down of our

own lives. That when we congratulate ourselves on our prophetic voice we do not discover that we are simply the pointers of fingers.

And there is no way but that way, because we are also called to be the healers of the breach. And that means that we are not allowed the easy self-satisfaction of anathematizing our adversaries, as much as we dig it, but in a time of such societal polarization we must also take responsibility for the divisions between people, and we must be the first to reach across the divide, and that seems to me to be the particularly Christian thing.

A few weeks ago I attended Governor Cuomo's Interfaith Prayer Breakfast in Albany. Some of you were there. And the keynote speaker was Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners Magazine and Sojourners Community. And he said that we talk all the time about how we, and whether we should, bring politics into the pulpit. He said that that is the wrong question. We should be talking instead about how we bring our theology into our protest. And I have thought a lot about that. And I have thought about what it would mean for us to stop reading the internet in the pulpit and to start reading the Bible in the street.

And what I have been moved to remember is that those Christians, or people of any faith, who have made an actual difference in the world, who have not been defined by their times but have defined their times by their witness to the love of God — Martin Luther King and Sojourner Truth and Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jonathan Daniels — were never simply tossed about by the politics or social winds of their day. Rather, they reshaped their day by the force of their own proclamation, by their willingness to pay the high price, and by their undaunting commitment to the first principles of their faith. They were theologians and the expression of their theology was their Christian action and witness and old fashioned Bible reading, and it required of them that they live up to and into that much higher calling, which in the end was just their baptismal promises, but which astonished the world. And changed the world forever. Which was that even as they made no peace with evil, they accepted no division among people. As Jesus accepted no division among people. These were they who extended their hand to their enemies, to those who sought their lives. Who risked human connection across every divide. And that commitment to and love for the whole human community was what changed minds and converted hearts and chipped away at oppression and left the world a little bit better. They were ingenious and they were lovely, they seemed sheer miracle to the multitude, and now they stand above history and in every age they will never be forgotten.

In a few minutes we will reaffirm our own vows and promises of ordination. Go deep. Don't do it if you don't mean it. But if you do, take what you will be given today — and you will be given everything you need — learn from the great transforming saints in whose steps we tread, be authentic and true real-life honest-to-God priests and deacons, and if you are of this mind go out and bring in the Kingdom. Amen.