



**Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, egg tempera on gessoed panel, 32x47 inches, Museum of Modern Art (New York), 1948**

**St. George's Cathedral  
Sunday, February 9, 2020  
Gospel: Matthew 5: 13-20, *This Light of Ours*  
*Eric Friesen***

There are two vivid images in our Gospel reading this morning - images of salt and light - salt that has lost its saltiness, its salty essence, and the light from a city on a hill. Two vivid and immediately understandable images describing how our faith should be lived in the world, lived in the world effectively. Salt of course the most precious substance in the world before ice makers and fridges and freezers, and in the ancient world a sacred

substance. Light - the always welcome substance to take away the darkness, a light that each one of us is asked to carry.

I've been reading and re-reading a wonderful new book by the New York Times columnist Timothy Egan. It's called: *A Pilgrimage to Eternity: From Canterbury to Rome In Search of a Faith*. It's a book about a rather lapsed Irish Catholic from Seattle who decided to walk, not the Camino in France and Spain, but the lesser known Via Francigena, the ancient pilgrimage route to Rome, that took medieval pilgrims from Canterbury in England, across the English Channel, through the Alpine peaks and small mountain towns of France, Switzerland and Italy, and ending up in Rome at the Vatican.

Egan's devout Catholic mother had died recently, not sure anymore of her once rock solid faith. And his family had had a complicated history with the church, including abuse by clergy. And so Timothy Egan, like so many spiritual seekers before him, decides to walk this daunting route of thousands of miles in search of a faith that has largely left him, and looking for answers to the question: Why has the Christian Church, which made our western world, why is our church collapsing into irrelevance in the West? It's a very honest and moving and personal journey. And so we walk with Timothy Egan through all those hallowed places, accompanied by Thomas Becket, Joan of Arc, Henry VIII, Martin Luther and many, many others. As the Via Francigena nears the end, it runs right through the Umbrian town of Assisi, and so we walk with St. Francis. Egan has done his homework for this pilgrimage and so when we come to Assisi we read with him the many sayings and examples of St. Francis. And the one that particularly caught my eye was this: "Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." (repeat).

Now this might seem like an odd quote to highlight from someone like myself who loves words, who uses words, who stands before you speaking words. But it is in fact an insight of genius, and an admonishment by St. Francis to those who would rely only on words to preach the Gospel. Because while words are effective and powerful and part of the arsenal of faith and art - think of Shakespeare, or the KJV of the Bible, or our Prayerbook - the truths of our Faith are also expressed beyond words. In the luminous power of painting and sculpture, in the aural and emotional power of music, in the all embracing visual and spacial power of great architecture. Beauty is Truth, said the poet Keats. Which is why I always try to accompany my words with a painting, a painting to add meaning to what I am trying to say with words. And why I often reference music, because music is the essence of life to me, as I know it is for so many of you, and speaks to our emotional core in a way nothing else does. A sentence of Timothy Egan's comes to me out of his book - his sister-in-law who has late stage cancer, for whom "music is the highest form of prayer." In the last hours of my father's life, he listened to the Schubert G Major Mass, praying his way to eternity.

On the front cover of your bulletin this morning is that stunning painting by Andrew Wyeth called *Christina's World*, which is in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. I chose it for this morning because I want to focus on the image of light from our reading of Matthew's Gospel. And when I was thinking about the light from the city on a hill, it was Andrew Wyeth's painting that came to mind, rather than a more obvious city-on-a-hill painting. Christina was a neighbour of the Wyeths in Maine, who because of polio or something similar, was unable to walk. She refused to use a

wheelchair, preferring to crawl, using her arms to drag the rest of her body along. “The challenge to me,” Wyeth explained, “was to do justice to her extraordinary conquest of a life which most people would consider hopeless.”

The note from the museum goes on to explain that this painting is a psychological portrait, of a state of mind rather than a place, though the austere landscape of coastal Maine certainly gives visual shape and form to the power of Wyeth’s vision here. But I see in it a theological portrait as well. Instead of a city on hill, I see the light focused on a farmhouse on a hill, a damaged soul reaching up to an ideal place, a place of healing, a place of warmth, a place of light that banishes the darkness, a place of home. As I look at this painting I see Christina standing in for all of us, sinners, broken and imperfect in some way, searching for physical and spiritual wholeness. Reaching for that light. The pastoral quality of this painting emphasizes the purity of an earlier time, a time of innocence, much like that which is found in the music of Aaron Copland’s *Appalachian Spring*. But what slashes across that innocence is the broken body of the young girl, reaching, seeking. Just like every one of us.

Our world is broken too, perhaps more broken than ever. From a Christian perspective, as Timothy Egan points out so effectively in his book, we in the western world have lost our way. The church is almost irrelevant in a rigorously secular society, or at least dwindling down to a precious few. The statistics are grim. Starting out in Canterbury, Egan notes the sharp decline in attendance in the Anglican Church. Only 15% of UK residents now claim to be Anglicans, the faith founded by Henry VIII. Some 5% actually attend

services. Thousands of churches have been shuttered over the years. Just like in Canada. Christianity is booming in Africa and Asia. But not in the West. Maybe a little more in the U.S. than in Canada and the U.K., but the Nones are growing - the Nones being young people who when asked their religious preference say - None. In the U.S. 71% of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 have NO religious affiliation. In Canada - church attendance has fallen below 13% for all religions, not just Christians. That's an astonishing statistic. As for our church in Canada, you all saw that depressing headline in the January *Anglican Journal* - **Gone by 2040?** (A wakeup call says our Primate - let's hope so!)

Why has Christianity in the West lost its saltiness, why has the beacon light on a hill gone out, or is flickering and about to go out? Is it God's fault? Has God gone silent, as many contend? Let me bring it down to St. George's here, this morning, Feb 9th, 2020 - You know I love this church, our church: how can we begin to fill this place again? I remember first coming here 10, 12 years ago and on major feast days it was filled. How can we get back there? This is the question we should be asking ourselves. There is huge potential here, because one thing Anglicans know how to do, when we do it right, and that's to preach the gospel using words only when necessary. Adding to words with music and liturgy and ritual and architecture.

Another quality about the Anglican Church I love is what a former Dean of the Episcopal General Seminary in New York (James C. Fenhagen) called: **Holy Worldliness**. We are a life-affirming people, not a pleasure denying people. We believe that everything in this world has the potential to be

good. We are shaped by those words in Genesis: “And God created the world and it was good.” Our tradition affirms wholeness, sexuality, and human pleasure and believe them to be reflections of the love of God. We refuse to live by fear or coercion or by those forces which play on our guilt or or our fears or our frustrations with what goes on all around us. We are a people of promise who even in the midst of death can proclaim hope. We choose to live in freedom and in loving response to what God has given us. Including sherry, for after service on a Sunday morning.

One of the many reasons I have been attracted to the Anglican Church - when I was becoming a member of the Episcopal Church in St. Paul, MN in 1986 I took a course on Anglican history and theology. It was required in that church. St. Clement’s Church. And I was fascinated by learning that when Queen Elizabeth 1st was creating the Religious Settlement, as an Act of Parliament, to unite her country bitterly divided between Catholics and Protestants, she famously declared “I have no desire to make windows into men’s souls.” In other words, she would not force Catholics to speak a confessional which would go against their beliefs. She would not require it of anyone. They would come to worship in the English Church believing as they did. This was the foundation of the great tolerance in our church for believers of all kinds. We are a big tent - we accept Christians on the whole spectrum from the sacramental to the evangelical. We have no windows into anyone’s souls. Is this not just another advantage we have in appealing to a suspicious, disinterested secular society? We will not judge them when they come in our door, we will not demand they think exactly as we do. They are welcome to come and worship as they are, with us.

Because make no mistake, while our churches are emptying, people are still seeking. Timothy Egan reports that over 200 million people in the world make some sort of spiritual pilgrimage every year. On the Via Francigena, some 40-thousand people walk at least some part of it every year. Perhaps most are not on a religious journey, but even if they just want space and time to think and reflect, they are on a kind of spiritual quest.

So how can we shine a light to welcome those in our community who should be attracted to this magnificent expression of Christian faith we have, that is our heritage? We can't fill the churches of Europe or the U.K. or the U.S. or Canada or even Ontario. But we can begin here, in St. George's, in Kingston and the Islands, to being a beacon of light to a needy community. I don't have all the answers by any means, but I think that if we are to succeed in going against the secular trend in our western society, we are going to have to be, among other things: bold, open to change, willing to go out of our comfort zones, willing to take risks, be excellent in all we do, understand the needs of our fellow citizens and neighbours, create programs for those whom we want to attract, and work to be a healing force in our community. We also have to take head on all the criticisms of the church and of Christianity that our secular friends throw at us. In other words, we have to be more like we are now, more and better and truly committed. We have a magnificent core of people here, dedicated, hard working, committed. But this core, you and I, won't live forever. Let our generation not be the last to turn out the lights in this beautiful and vital spiritual place.

That's what our Gospel reading today is commanding us to be. A light that has not gone out. Salt that has not lost its saltiness, its essence.

I am an optimist. I have to be, because I care about things which are precious and life-giving and vulnerable. And because as a Christian I am a person who lives in hope. I'm often asked - will classical music survive? I believe it will, but it is taking a lot of hard and bold thinking and risk taking renewal for organizations which present classical music for it to be vital into the next 50 years. In classical music I see signs of promise all over the place. The same with the Christian Church. For one, we know it's thriving in Africa and Asia. But I don't want to move there to worship. I want to worship here, in the West, in Canada, in Kingston or wherever I live for the rest of my life. And for the lives of my children and grandchildren. And I believe if we are true to our ancestors, who lived and died for the faith we today proclaim, and if we believe we have a faith worthy of proclaiming to a hostile and broken world, Christianity will survive. And good old St. Francis has given us the blueprint: "Start by doing what is necessary," he said, "then do what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible." Amen.