

**Transcript of the Meditation offered at the 225th Diocesan Convention
by The Rt. Rev. M. Thomas Shaw, SSJE
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You've all heard me say many times before that the strongest work that we do in the Diocese of Massachusetts is in our parishes, the local community. It's where most of you do the best work for our Lord Jesus Christ. But some of God's work has to be done together, and that's what we're here to do today. That's what resolutions are all about, the resolutions that will come later in the day, they're something we can't do on our own, but when we come together and we vote a resolution, we have a stronger voice. We're going to hear some reports later on from various groups in the diocese, and, again, they're reports about the best work that we do together in our life. It's what the elections are all about today, about our common life, about our common life locally within the Diocese of Massachusetts, and nationally in the Episcopal Church. And it's why we labor over the budget today and the good work that Jim Gammill and the Budget Committee have done. The budget is about our common work, the work that we do in all of our 185 parishes and in our chaplaincies across the diocese.

Some of you have heard that we're also embarking on a comprehensive campaign in the diocese. It's something that the Diocesan Council, your elected officials of our common life, voted last spring. And over the summer 225 clergy and lay people from across the diocese were interviewed, and we heard from those interviews about the common need that we have in this diocese, the common need that we have to address issues of the environment; the common need that we have to minister to our children, to our young adults; the common need that we have for all of our changing communities across the life of the diocese. And our common life in what Bishop Lawrence said in the early 20th century around the spiritual center of our diocese, the cathedral. And then our international mission as well. So we heard from you all these issues about our common life that would be difficult for individual parishes to do on their own, but together, we can have a strong and effective voice for proclaiming Christ's Gospel.

We also heard when we were doing those interviews over the summer that there's a tremendous amount of local need in our parishes as well. And so now we're trying to design a comprehensive campaign that will not only address our common life but will also address the needs of our local communities across the diocese.

All of today, the resolutions, the budget, the elections, the reports—all of it is about our common life, our life together.

And our theme for this convention is about answering God's urgent call together. And so before we begin all of our deliberations, the reports, the budget, the things that make up our common life, I'd like to focus our work today in Scripture and in prayer.

So let's just take a minute to be silent together in this extraordinary space, and I'll offer a prayer, and then a meditation.

O gracious God, we praise you and we bless you for the gift of our common life. We thank you, God, for the community of this diocese. For the work that you've given us in all of our parishes and chaplaincies to proclaim your love through our savior, Jesus Christ. Open us today, God. Open us to your Spirit, as your Spirit moves among us and draws us closer and closer together in our common life. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

I think most of you know that I have just returned about a month ago from a five-month sabbatical. And I spent most of the sabbatical over the summer working with three interns and our property manager at Emery House in our organic gardens there. I wanted to learn about our environment, I wanted to learn from these young people, and I wanted to be able to understand how we best supply food for the people of our CSA. So every morning before we went to Brent Was to receive our instructions about what we were to weed, or what we were to plant or what we were to fertilize that day, we'd go and take care of the livestock, the turkeys or the chickens. I usually fed the pigs that we have.

And it was toward the last week in May, as I came out of my house—and by that time, I'd had three weeks, and most of the things I was concerned about, things about work, about the diocese, about myself, they'd had some time to settle—and as I was walking across the field to the place where we congregate together, it was an exquisitely beautiful morning, like so many of those mornings we had this last summer. There was a deep blue sky, there was a wind from the river and there were those vibrant greens after the spring rain everywhere. And as I looked out on all of this beauty, it almost took my breath away. I stopped dead still, and what came to my mind is a poem that I learned as a teenager by Edna St. Vincent Millay. It goes like this:

O World, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag
And all but cry with colour! That gaunt crag
To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!
World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!

Long have I known a glory in it all,
But never knew I this;
Here such a passion is
As stretcheth me apart. Lord, I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year.
My soul is all but out of me,—let fall
No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.

Almost every day I read that poem as I'd go out to work, or snatches of it, like the first line, would come to me while I was working. Over the summer, that beautiful morning, that poem, became an integral part of my prayer. In fact, I would say that morning and the poem led me into a deep truth about the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The

poem and the morning became a way into a felt level of the knowledge that the whole world, the universe, whatever the world is beyond that universe, is held and sustained by the beauty of God. In some sense that morning and the poem took the reality of the magnificence of God's beauty from my head to my heart. I didn't all of a sudden become a kind of Pollyanna, one of those people who will not acknowledge the darkness and suffering in life, but rather that my own troubles, my anxieties, my sinfulness, and, in fact, everything that is dark and painful in the world, is not only subject to the beauty of God, but it's held by the beauty of God. That God reigns over everything, and God and the beauty of God supports everything.

I'm sure that all of you have had experiences like that. Some people tell me about the birth of their child, and that that is the thing that has drawn them into the depth of the beauty of God. Or a moment of tremendous physical beauty or a relationship. But something, something that, all of a sudden, your perspective on the world is tilted, tilted toward this magnificent beauty.

Toward the end of my sabbatical I went on a vacation to Rome. Joe Robinson, the rector of Christ Church in Cambridge, and I were talking before I went to Rome. I'd only been to Rome for meetings and as a kind of stopping-off place. So I didn't really know it as a tourist. And Joe told me about two frescoes by Caravaggio that were in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo. He said, You've got to go see those. And so on one of the first days that I was there, I went.

One of them was the image that is before you now. It's the conversion of St. Paul that we heard about in the Book of Acts this morning in our reading. I stood before this fresco for a long time. There was hardly anybody else around. And what struck me first was the stillness of Paul's conversion. And then, I looked at the figure of Paul, and I'd never really thought about Paul's age before at the time of his conversion, but of course he had to have been a fairly young man. Almost everything else that we see in religious art has Paul as someone who is older. And then I saw, there Paul was, on his back, where we're most vulnerable, when we're lying on our back, and his arms are outstretched. And how the painting was infused with light. I thought, as I stood there, about everything that I know of Paul before his conversion, and even after his conversion as well. His passion for the law. His deep love of the temple and the synagogue and the faith that he'd inherited from his ancestors. His understanding of God that had been there with him the whole of his life, how he perceived God. How all of it was subsumed—the law, the prophets, the temple, the synagogue—all of it was subsumed when he was given this deeper vision of God through the risen Christ. How the beauty of God so far exceeded his understanding of God that he could only raise his arms in subjection to it all.

In this moment, what is invited from his head to his heart is the expansiveness of God, the hugeness of God's presence in the world. It stretches beyond the law, beyond the temple, beyond even the Gentiles to whom he ministered, to the creation itself. And it's from meditating and praying on this experience that Paul was able to preach and write his brilliant theology of God's love through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is able to move from his contained, prescribed understanding of God to something glorious that

consistently in almost every chapter of his letters confounds not only his readers but him. In almost every chapter of his letters he challenges us and he challenges himself with the majesty and the magnificence of God. You know, one of the things I think we forget is that Paul didn't for a minute think he was becoming a Christian when he was struck down. He thought that Christ was leading him deeper and deeper into the reality of the beauty of God.

If we are going to take seriously, together and individually, answering God's urgent call, then first we have to be grounded in this vision of the beauty of God. God calls us back, again and again, in whatever ministry it is that we're called to do together. Back to the moments or the times when we've experienced and been overwhelmed by the expansive, breathtaking beauty of God, that moment that's been nurtured for every one of us, Sunday after Sunday, in the liturgy and in our prayer and by the people that we love.

So in this meditation time try to go to that place. Maybe let the painting take you there while I do this, and that is, read another one, another poem. And this one is by the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas. It's called "The Coming."

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows: a bright
Serpent, A river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime
On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. many People
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

It's another poem that I pray with almost every morning. Especially that phrase at the end: Let me go there. For it tells me where God wants to go in Christ in me. That Christ, as he looks at me, as he sees the outstretched arms of the barren, impoverished, hungry part of myself, that's where he wants to go first. To where my arms are outstretched in need. I think Christ rejoices in whatever gifts I have, whatever accomplishments I've done in my life, the joy that I have in my life, but first he wants to go to the places within me where there is the most suffering, where my arms are

outstretched. He wants to go there just like he did in Galilee, to heal and to teach in the barren parts of my life so he can draw me into the fullness of the Godhead of the Trinity. And of course, that's where he wants to go with you as well. It's to the places of deepest suffering in your life, where your arms are outstretched, where there is barrenness. That's where Christ wants to be and minister in each of us. We must not think that God wants to go first to the places of good within us, where we've done His will, where we've got it all together. For if we do, we'll miss the point of what it means to be in Christ. Christ's desire to go to the most painful part of our lives reveals also where Christ is calling us to be in the world as well. Because we have Christ within us, we too want to minister in the place that is most barren.

A little over five years ago, the day after the hurricane Katrina struck and caused such devastation along the Gulf Coast, Bud walked into my office, and he said, Our diocese, we have to go there. We have to go there. And we did. To the place of the deepest suffering and pain. We had it again, those of us who were at the Clergy Day about a month ago, when Gayle told us of her experience of witnessing on the Arizona-Mexico border with the other bishops, and as she spoke so passionately about what she saw there and what she experienced, she did by her very presence invite us, all of us in the diocese, along with those who worked so hard to register voters in Arizona, into this place of confusion and danger.

You know, when I came back from my sabbatical, I spent almost all of the last month just meeting with groups. I met with the deacons. I met with the clergy of color. I met with the Episcopal City Mission board and the Church Home Society. A couple of weeks ago we had a summit of our traditionally black parishes. I met with the Life Together program and with the people that are part of the Hope in Action campaign. And every single one of those groups know of some need in our world and our need to be there as a Christian witness. What can we do, say the college chaplains to me, about the rash of teenage suicides among gay and lesbian and bisexual and transgendered youth and the bullying these young people have had to endure in their lives? They say to me, We have to go there, Tom, because it's a place of need. What can we do for the plight of immigrants in our country, said the clergy of color to me and the Episcopal City Mission. It's a place of such need.

It's one of the things I'm proudest of of the Diocese of Massachusetts. I've often been humbled by the lack of complacency in this diocese. When need is exposed, this diocese, in following our Lord, seems to let the Spirit take us there, whether it's our Jubilee work, our B-SAFE work or the hundreds of outreach programs that are everywhere in our diocese. I think it's one of the reasons that so many of us have been inspired by our Life Together interns. They have an enthusiasm that lights our enthusiasm to go to the places of need. Like the son, that's the place that we choose to be in the world.

But there's something else about Thomas's poem. He writes about radiant slime, of light, of fierce colors. What I'm quite certain he's saying is that these barren places to which we're drawn, these places of need, these places of outstretched arms, as we're drawn there, we're drawn into that beauty of God that I spoke about before. I know I felt that

way, and I'm certain the other 899 volunteers at the B-SAFE program felt the same way. I volunteered to be with the kids in Chelsea, immigrant kids, who have a poor school system, a tough life. A place of need. And of course what happened, by going to that place of need, I was transformed. And I know that's the case of every single one of you at this convention today. That you've been drawn to a place of need, whether it's pastorally, or that it's doing some mission work, it's you that's been changed. It is the rich soil of this morning's Gospel, the soil that brings forth the hundredfold, and the 60 and the 30. It's a curious paradox that as we plunge deeper and deeper into the beauty of God, as we answer God's call to join God in the barrenness of the world, we also experience again this beauty.

After I stood in front of that fresco, *The Conversion of Paul*, by Caravaggio, I adopted Caravaggio as a kind of project for the rest of my vacation. I don't relax very well. And so I spent significant amounts of time hunting down his frescoes, his paintings, in churches and in museums all across Rome. I found this one, on the screen now, the *Inspiration of Matthew*, in the church of San Luigi Dei Francesi. It's called the *Inspiration of Matthew*. It's Matthew writing his Gospel, responding to the angel who's dictating it to him, hovering above him. It's apparently not one of Caravaggio's best paintings. In fact from what I've read since I've been home, it's a kind of substitute painting that he offered because the patron didn't like the original one. But what I love about this painting is its sense of urgency. This Matthew, he's up on one knee, listening, writing as fast as he can because he knows the world desperately needs his Good News of Jesus Christ. Not a moment can be wasted. He senses how much we need this word. It's as if we cannot live another minute without this message of God's love for us in Jesus Christ. His world is perishing before his eyes, so he has to get it all down now, get it out there, to give the world the victory and the hope in Jesus Christ.

You know, every one of us at this convention today, we write God's Gospel with our lives. Our lives are like the Gospel of Matthew. They proclaim the love of God in a world that is so easily drawn into despair and hopelessness. There is, as Matthew felt it, not a moment to waste. The call of God is just as urgent today as it was then. So, in this convention, in this year that God has given us to minister, let us answer God's urgent call together. Let's do it from that place of beauty, from the expansiveness of God that we all know about, and go to those places of deepest need, that we know that we'll be transformed as well. Let us be taken by the urgency. And let us do it together.

Let us pray.

Take us deeper, God, into your inexhaustible beauty. Confound us with your majesty. Let all our anxiety and our hopelessness, the darkness and the sin of this world be subject to your glory. Let us rest in that place, and then show us the place of greatest need and the place of deepest conversion for us. Quicken us with that sense of urgency. Let your angels inspire us to be your living word. We ask all this in Christ's name. Amen.