

Saint Thomas the Apostle

December 21, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Hebrews 10:35–11:1; Psalm 126; John 20:24–29

On December 21, 1983, I was ordained priest while serving at the Church of the Incarnation in Dallas. Three days before, an Arctic weather system sent the temperature below freezing until December 30. In many ways, the city was shut-down because there was ice and snow. Father Charles Jenkins, then a rector in Arlington, Texas—now-retired bishop of Louisiana, for whom we have been praying—made it to Dallas that night. A few years ago, a man I knew when he was a teenager growing up at Incarnation, began the project of getting the tapes of the-then rector’s sermons on the web. The rector was Paul Waddell Pritchartt.

Incarnation was a historically low-church parish. When I went there, the main service on Sunday was Morning Prayer and Sermon from the 1928 Prayer Book. The new book was in use at all of the other services—and its three-year lectionary had been adopted for all services. I have always been thankful for that period of ministry; I learned a great deal from the rector and the other three priests on the staff. The other assistant priests had been successful rectors and specialists in one or more areas of parish ministry.

It would be Charles Jenkins, also a Nashotah graduate, who brought me to Baton Rouge, where I would serve for a little over three years. In 1988, Charles helped me find my first position as rector in Michigan City, Indiana. In 1998, the-then retired Bishop of Chicago James Montgomery, who sent me to seminary and permitted me to work in Dallas, would be called by the chair of Saint Mary’s rector search committee to see if he had any names for them. He had one. After being called to Saint Mary’s, I would learn that in 1979, he had had one name to give them, Edgar Wells.

Father Pritchartt spent two full days working on a 10-minute sermon for the 9:00 and 11:15 morning services. At that time, the average total Sunday attendance at the 7:30 AM and the later services was 1500—300 at the early service, 600 at both of the later services. He also memorized a shorter sermon for the weekday Eucharist for which he was the regular celebrant.

He would sometimes have a notecard with him but almost always, he preached from memory. He was outstanding in the pulpit.

When I came to New York and got to know Father John Andrew, then the retired rector of Saint Thomas Church, I realized he and Paul were part of a generation of priests whose primary work was preaching and stewardship. Priest associates on staff still do most of the pastoral work and Christian Education at Incarnation and Saint Thomas.

If you search on the internet for Paul Pritchardt, you can find the website. His finest sermon that I heard, or at least the one I remember most, was preached on the Baptism of Christ in 1982. He called it “[Life Exchange](#).” It’s on the web—you can hear it without charge by getting a free SoundCloud account.

Father Pritchardt called the ordination sermon “[When There is No More Room for Mystery](#).” He said among other things, “Stephen, you are not being ordained a priest to save your own soul.” He was entirely right about that.

Now, a very few words about the apostle Thomas. There is a great debate about whether Thomas touched the risen Lord when he appeared to his disciples the second time, a week after the resurrection. Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”¹ He didn’t say, “Have you believed because you have touched my wounds?” I think it’s Jesus Christ who touches our wounds, yours and mine, with his healing in this life and in the life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹ John 20:29.