

Funeral Sermon for
Father Lester Brooks Thomas
September 21, 1920 – February 11, 2011

The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
February 14, 2011

Cynthia, Linda and Ken, Steven and Beth, Cynthia and Tim, Paul and Lara, Elizabeth and Ken, Mary Jane. To all of Father Thomas's grandchildren, great grandchildren, nieces, nephews, friends, and relatives. Personally, and on behalf of the Bishop, the clergy present, the parishioners of St. Andrews and of so many parishes of the diocese, I want to express our sympathy and condolences at the death of Lester Brooks Thomas. We have lost a colleague, a friend and pastor. But we know that you have lost a husband, a father, and grandfather, a brother, an uncle. Our loss is great. We know that it hardly compares to yours. Let me also express to you my thanks and gratitude to you for the privilege of being allowed to be with you and Les in the time leading to his death. Last Thursday evening when I came into the house, I took off my shoes because they were covered with snow. But, I soon realized, that the ground on which I walked was holy. Les lived a holy life. Les died a holy death. I thank you for allowing me to be part of that sacred time with you.

Sermons at the funeral for church members are sometimes quite easy to prepare. When I have known people for so long, its easy to talk about them. At such times, all that is necessary is to tell some stories about their involvement in the church, about their faith, about their life. No one expects you to remember everything, to say everything. You just speak from the heart, say as much as you need to, acknowledge that though they were good, they were less than perfect. Then of course, we wrap it up by speaking about Jesus, and how by the gift of God's love, the wonderful blessed life the person lived continues, and is now being lived in the fullness of eternity. Yes, at those funerals, there are tears of joy, and hope and grief. Yes, sometimes, when that parishioner is also a friend, the sermons are difficult to preach. But, really, the writing of the sermon is easy.

That being said, one would have thought that the sermon for Father Thomas would have been easy. There is so much to say about him, his life and his joys. But, when I came to the house on Friday morning to do some funeral planning I was given some very clear instructions from his children and his wife that this funeral was not to be about their father, or his life. This sermon is to be about Jesus. Jesus is to be the focus of the liturgy not Father Thomas.

OK, I can do that, I thought. And I will do that. But, we all know that Fr. Thomas did not always do everything exactly as he was told. We all know that Father Thomas, did on occasion wander off script.

So, in his honor I intend to wander off script just a bit this evening.

Les Thomas: a husband, a father and a grandfather. As I have come to know Les these past years, it was clear that there was nothing in his life that brought him as much joy as times with his family. When he would talk about traveling with Cynthia (and Mary Jane) to be with family for weddings or vacations, his face would light up. When he would talk about children and grandchildren coming to see him he could hardly contain his joy. Who of us can forget how delighted, how moved Les was last October when the

family came together to celebrate his 90th birthday.

Les Thomas: A priest, a pastor, a preacher, a teacher. Les loved the Episcopal Church, this diocese, the priests and parishes of the diocese. Les loved his involvement with Cursillo and treasured those relationships. Les especially loved the people in the parishes he served. St. Marks, Newaygo, St. Phillips, Grand Rapids, St. Peter's, Montague, St. Paul's in Greenville. Les loved supplying at churches around the diocese. He loved to teach and preach---yes he wandered off script at times, yes he preached too long at times, yes you wondered at times how he got from here to there in a sermon, yes sometimes you wondered if he or we were ever going to get out of a sermon. But, at the core of his preaching and teaching, Les preached that each one of us is loved by God. Nothing would ever get in the way of the message of that love. Then Les would ask, Now what are we going to do about it? How are you going to live in the realization of that love?

Les Thomas: the first rector of St. Andrews. The priest who served this church when its early members were gathering at Van Strien funeral home, when they built the first church, and then this sanctuary. Fr. Thomas, who with his first wife, Verna, raised their children as part of this parish family. Fr. Thomas, who served the people of this congregation for over thirty years, and then as Rector Emeritus, with Cynthia was a faithful member of this congregation. Les Thomas, who made my job as rector so much easier. Les and those past members of the congregation helped establish in this community a spirit of service and hospitality, a spirit of kindness and respect. Les taught this congregation to stay focused on Jesus. No matter the issue, no matter the controversy in the country or in the church, Les reminded the people of this parish, that despite any differences, indeed because of those differences, all of us, wherever we stood, whatever we believed, were sons and daughters of a God who loved us, sisters and brothers of a Jesus who lived and died for us. It is the spirit that Les and those early members of this congregation established here at St. Andrews that still inspires us in our life and ministry today. Les taught me to love the people of God, and to love the people of St. Andrews. We serve and love them best when we preach, teach and celebrate Jesus.

Les Thomas: a man who was proud to have served his country. Les Thomas: a proud graduate of South High. Les Thomas was a fisherman, an outdoorsman. Yes we wish Les had lived longer, we cannot imagine life without Les telling stories, laughing, driving around in his truck, puttering around the house or cabin, loving his family. But, when all is said and done, Les lived a full life, a complete life, a blessed life. And, when all is said and done, Les died trusting in the bright light of Jesus.

But all is not yet said and done. The most important piece is still unsaid. Les was and is a child of God; a beloved son of God. For all the good he did, for all that he accomplished, Les would want to us keep our focus on Jesus.

Les was not perfect. Like us he had his flaws, his quirks, his broken places. Les knew that in his life and ministry, he had made mistakes, he had hurt people, indeed, he knew that he had sinned. But he knew in his heart that by God's grace those human quirks, faults and mistakes could be overcome, those hurts healed and those sins forgiven. Les knew that when he came to the time of his death, he, like all of us, relied only on the love of our God. Only the love of God enables us to be raised to eternal life. Only by the gracious love of God are we given the gifts of eternal healing.

Years ago, when Les was a venerable rector of St. Andrews, and I was just a young priest, assistant in Battle Creek, I remember sitting in a small group at clergy gathering with Les. I had no idea who he was. I remember to this day him saying, in a way that only Les could say: "We are all literalists, because

we believe that when Jesus said the bread and wine were his body and blood, he meant it. We are literalists because when Jesus said that those who eat this bread and drink this cup will live forever, he meant it.”

Those might have been the first words I ever heard Les say, the first time I ever heard him teach. I remembered these words last Sunday when I gathered to share Eucharist at Les and Cynthia’s home with Les, Cynthia, Linda and Cindy. Les took communion, the bread and wine, and he rose up in the bed, lifted his hands and said, “I am stronger, the body and blood of Jesus are making me stronger“. As we stood there, we knew that Les was dying, and that soon, very soon, the cancer would take his life. And we also that knew that Les was speaking the truth. The Body and Blood of Jesus that had nourished Les all through his life, that had strengthened him all through his life was making him stronger. It was giving him strength for one last journey, for one last crossing of the river. The Body and Blood of Jesus was strengthening Les and preparing him to come face to face with his loving God, with his friend Jesus.

We celebrate his life tonight.

We give thanks for his love and his ministry.

We give thanks for his laughter and his joy.

We give thanks for all that he taught us.

We give thanks for Lester Brooks Thomas: Husband, Father, Brother, Grandfather, Uncle, Priest, Rector, Neighbor, Fisherman, Friend.

We give thanks for Lester Brooks Thomas: Brother of Jesus. Child of God.