

St Thomas' Church
Lent IV
March 22, 2020
rmcneely+
(To the congregation sheltering in place)

I confess this has been a difficult sermon to write. Torn between the need for God's grace in this time of medical risk and the need for normalcy, for getting us back on the pathway to Calvary and the Resurrection in three weeks; I have been drawn to Calvary. Perhaps there lies, also, the assurance we need at the moment.

You have noticed that the format of this writing is different from what I usually use. These are unprecedented times. Never before has St Thomas' been closed and unable to celebrate communion on a Sunday. Perhaps never before has the need for God's mercy, prayer and "church" been greater. Since this sermon will not be spoken, I have adjusted the format to the written word, intended to be read, not heard.

So, for the next 10 minutes, try to place yourself in the pew at St Thomas', that refuge of God's love. That safe place. The candles are lit, the altar vested, the flowers soft and calming (that's right, this is Rose Sunday and we have soft pink roses in the vases on either side of the altar). The silence of the first service or the music of the second has put you at peace, as you pray your personal preparatory prayers. You are surrounded by loving Christian people and sometimes you can actually feel the love of God as the service begins: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid . . ."

We return to the themes of Lent: Examination of our lives, our souls and hearts with a view toward confession and absolution: atonement with God. We have adopted the rigors of some personal sacrifice; that "By our bodily fasting thou dost curb our sinfulness, dost raise our minds from things of earth, does renew our strength and reward is with manifold blessings; through Jesus Christ our Lord." We walk that sometimes painful and narrow path to the Cross. To be with Him in His death agony and to better feel the defeat of evil and the gift of everlasting life three days hence.

Today the Church reminds us on this Laetare Sunday, this Mothering Sunday, this Refreshment Sunday; who we are and what the presence of Christ our Lord means in our lives.

In the Epistle for the day, Paul reminds us that we are the "children of the promise" and are free. What is Paul telling us?

We must go back to the book of Genesis, Chapter 21:

Abram, who received the original covenant with God, and his wife Sarah had no children and were "well stricken with age" (Abram is thought to have been 100 years old and

Sarah was many years beyond child bearing age). But God had promised that Abram would father a son and a new nation (more people than there are grains of sand on the beach). Abram and Sarah lost patience and took matters into their own hands. Under the Hebrew law Abram could have a lawful son with a surrogate wife, chosen by Sarah. Hagar, an Egyptian bond woman/slave owned by Abram was Sarah's choice. Hagar bore a son, Ishmael who was according to the Hebrew Law, the first born son of Abram. But no sooner had that happened than Sarah conceived and a son was born to Abram and Sarah; Isaac. Ishmael was born pursuant to "the law" and Isaac was born pursuant to "the promise of God"¹. Both were sons of Abram although of differing biology.

Paul was preaching to the church he founded in Galatia (in the highlands of Turkey near Anatolia, Ankara Province) that in Christ there is true liberty and freedom from sin (freedom from sin as opposed to bondage to sin). He saw in the story of Isaac and Ishmael an allegory: that the descendants of Ishmael were in bonds by the law but the descendants of Isaac were of the promise of God and were free. Since we are the adopted children of God by virtue of our baptism, we are heirs of the promise and are free; born of the promise as opposed to the other branch (through Ishmael) that is in bondage to sin. Paul summarized in the very next verse: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage".

Cast in Lenten terms, Paul is reminding us that from our very heritage, in Jesus we have freedom from our sins; the very notion so important to our Lenten devotions. And that is who we are; the children of God. Inheritors of the promise of God and the liberty bought by Jesus, the Christ at the Cross.

St John, an eye witness to the events about which he writes, recounts the feeding miracle of the 5,000. This event is so important that it is contained in every Gospel. Was it here that Jesus foreshadowed the Eucharist? Here, that He taught the priestly actions: take, bless-give thanks, break and distribute the Body of Christ? Was it here that He wanted the Apostles to begin to understand what He would tell them that night in the upper room? Was it here that Christ shared a "Last Supper" with the crowd of followers? Was it here that He began to show them that He would be with us always? Was it here that He planted the seed that would later blossom when the men walking with Him to Emmaus recognized the Resurrected Jesus in the breaking of the bread?

The people immediately saw a meaning in the miracle; Jesus was "*that prophet* that should come into the world". They saw the sign. Only the Messiah could feed 5000 with 5 barley loaves. They knew of two other prophets that had feed the multitudes: Moses fed the Israelites for 40 years in the dessert with bread from heaven. Elisha had fed an hundred men with twenty loaves of barley. A few months later Peter, James and John would witness the transfiguration and see prototypes of the Messiah: Moses on one side of Jesus and Elijah on the other. All were prophets and more.

¹ Although it is true that the Muslims descend from Ishmael, it is important to avoid the prideful notion that the Isaac family line is somehow better than the Ishmael line. Succumbing to pride here masks the truth that Paul is trying to impart: in Jesus there is freedom from sin and liberty in a good life.

The bread is the symbol of the day. It ties us to the bread God provided to those wandering in the desert, the manna from heaven. Jesus would tell them that the bread was His body; broken, blessed and given to them in Communion. The bread of the feeding miracles began as an oblation, a very small gift. But in Christ it became overflowing. The five loaves fed 5,000 and still left 12 baskets when all had partaken. Such are the inexhaustible riches of Christ. His hands are never diminished in their use. They are increased beyond human understanding. More remains after each satisfaction. The Communion is the same. His Body and Blood take us to eternity fixed in time to join with Him in the sacrifice as if we join an ever-growing river.

Again cast in Lenten terms, the feeding of the multitudes is demonstrated and tangible proof of the compassion of Our Lord. Before anyone could come to Him, He took initiative to care for those who had followed Him. So He does for us. In this time of Lenten sacrifice, this time of medical threat and uncertainty above all we must keep foremost in our minds and hearts that Jesus is a compassionate Lord.

Next week we begin the Passiontide; the annual remembrance of His last 13 days to the Cross. With God's grace we will be together again to observe Maundy Thursday and on Good Friday will stand together by His side at the Crucifixion.

The Lord be with you. May you live in peace and may the peace of God, which passeth all understanding be upon you and remain with you, always.