

“GOD’S OWN LENT”

A SERMON FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

MARCH 22ND, 2020, AT ST. JOHN’S CHURCH.

“Be ye not like horse and mule, which have no understanding, whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, else they will not obey thee” (Psalm 32:10).

When God called Moses to lead his people from slavery into freedom (Exodus 3:1-15), they began a journey that led from Egypt up to the promised land, and ultimately to Jerusalem. It was a journey through a desert wilderness, a hard and difficult way, a place of scarcity, temptation, danger, and death; yet the Lord sustained them with bread in the wilderness, the gift of manna, and water from the rock. Though slavish and rebellious, willful and hard hearted, nonetheless they learned, though not without many tribulations and trials, many rebellions and repentances, to trust in him for all their need, and to follow in his way in obedience. Thus out of a slavish and rebellious people he fashioned a people of his very own, a free and holy people to show forth his most worthy praise.

Today’s gospel lesson (John 6:1-14) also sets us in the wilderness, but as followers not of Moses but of Jesus, and engaged in an exodus not earthly but heavenly – the great and eternal exodus from sin to righteousness, from death to life, as children of Jerusalem which is the above, the free mother of the free (Galatians 4:21-end). In this spiritual exodus we are also sustained with bread in the wilderness: for In the hands of Jesus, as today’s gospel lesson tells us, what was far too little became much more than enough: five loaves and two small fishes feed the five thousand, and the leftovers filled twelve baskets full - bread enough to nourish the twelve tribes of Israel - all God’s people in all places and all times. It is an assurance that even as we make our exodus through the wilderness, Christ the good Shepherd will feed his flock, and sustain them with heavenly bread.

In the face of the pandemic, and the measures required to restrain it, we find ourselves in another wilderness, in the place of danger and death. Moreover the nature of the pandemic requires we abstain from the very thing that would mean so much to us all: the Bread of heaven, made visible to us in the sacrament of the Eucharist; the mystical Body of Christ, gathered with one accord in prayer, in the Lord’s house on the Lord’s day. In a time of isolation, loneliness, and fear about disease, economic hardship, and death, it is a harsh deprivation. How can we be the Church and flock of Christ, if Christ our Shepherd does not feed us?

About two weeks ago I was considering how to administer the eucharist during this time. You will not be surprised to learn that I dismissed the expedient advocated by some clergy, of “drive-by” communion. Perhaps (I thought) we could restrict the chalice to the celebrant, devise an intricate ritual of sanitizing purifications that would have made a Sarum High Mass look half-hearted, limit the gatherings to just ten persons. Yet even one contagious person can infect many - and we would have all to cross our fingers that the sacrament of the Lord’s body would not mean death for any communicants. No, I concluded, God was

indicating another way for us. There may be exceptional circumstances – as for the dying – but exceptional is what they are. No drive-by magic morsels for the rest of us. We are facing *a eucharistic fast*.

There is a precedent for this eucharistic fast in the Church's tradition. Before the reformation, at the outset of Lent, grievous sinners were put to public penance, in preparation for their formal reconciliation on Maundy Thursday, and their re-admission to the paschal mysteries. Until that time, they did not receive communion. And since we are often so half-hearted and legalistic about our own Lenten repentance, it seems that now God has imposed his own Lent on us. Are we too obtuse, too proud, to take the hint? "Be ye not like horse and mule, which have no understanding, whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, else they will not obey thee" (Psalm 32:10). The truth is, we *are* like horse and mule, and so God *has* held our mouths with bit and bridle. Let's start by accepting that. It's the least we can do, to accept the eucharistic fast imposed on us by God.

There is another precedent for this eucharistic fast in the Church's tradition. Between the mass on Maundy Thursday, and the first mass of Easter, no sacraments were celebrated for the faithful. When Christ's body rests in the tomb and his soul descends into hell, all sacraments cease. That too may be where we are also – in the place of the dead, awaiting resurrection. It is call for us to die with Christ, that we may rise with him – to die to willful pride, rebellion, hardhearted refusal to trust his promises or obey his commandments – to die to sin, that we may live unto God (cf Romans 6).

What is the good news in all this? It is this: that it is the *Lord* that has led us into the wilderness, this place of danger and death. And that is our hope. Because even in the place of death, the Lord remains our God, and we remain his people, and even here he gives his people bread – though not perhaps as we might like it. The Israelites you know complained about the manna, and demanded the fresh salads of Egypt. We might do the same, after days and weeks of tinned soups and frozen dinners. And Jesus gave the multitudes barley loaves and dried fish – nothing to tempt our taste buds, the food of the very poor. And we too may prefer a form of worship that tempts our taste buds also. We too may prefer the Eucharist celebrated with the "choral and floral" glory of the St. Johns liturgy – yet we must accept that he has exiled us from that glory now. The desert fathers and mothers of the early Church, who exiled themselves in the desert to devote themselves to the word of God and prayer, they are models for us, in our internal exile, our own sojourning in the wilderness, to give ourselves to the word of God in prayer. For (as we heard on the first Sunday in Lent), "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

In the Scriptures we have the Word of God written; and in the historic Prayer Book we have its distillation for the purpose of worship. If we are indeed the church and people of God, we will not despise these gifts. We will take those books in our hands, we will open them, turn their pages, and read their words aloud, either alone or together. We might even dare to sing a hymn Do you see what God is making us do? He is requiring us each to take a greater measure of responsibility for our own spiritual health, by using the means of grace which have been given to us for this very purpose. He is requiring us not to be children, spoon-fed on pabulum, but spiritual adults, capable of eating solid food. That will be daunting, and perhaps difficult – not just learning how to use the books, and find the right pages – but engaging with a teaching that is demanding to understand and to accept. But God's Spirit will be speaking God's own words to us, in us, and through us – words of challenge and comfort – words of judgment and mercy – words that move us to repentance to faith, and to loving obedience – words that make the dead to live. And though we have no solemn assembly, no gorgeous

liturgy all “choral and floral”, no Eucharist, we will *be the church* in the wilderness, a witness to the grace which sustains us even now, and of the hope to which we journey.

God has imposed his own fast on us. Let us not be “like to horse and mule which have no understanding, whose mouths must be held with bit and bridle, else they will not come nigh” him. Let us humble ourselves under his mighty hand, feed upon his life-giving Word in prayer - and when it pleases the Lord to restore us to us the Eucharist and the Solemn Assembly in St. John’s Church, we will return to them humbled, purified, strengthened, with a deeper repentance, a more lively faith, a more fervent love. We shall return from exile as a people ready to show forth his most worthy praise. And so God’s own Lent will bring us to God’s own Easter, and through this wilderness of danger and death we shall come to resurrection . Amen.

- Gavin Dunbar, Rector.

NOTICES

- As the Senior Warden and I said in the letter that went to you by email on Thursday, though services are suspended, church is not cancelled – because church cannot be cancelled – it is what we are by faith and baptism into Christ, and by the power of God
- for Christ has built his church on the rock of faith and “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”.
- What’s important for us now is to discern *how* we are to be the church in this time of trial
- I have three requests for you all:
- First, I will simply affirm, that love for our neighbours means doing all we can to “flatten the curve” of new infections by practicing strict physical isolation
- Second, physical distancing does not mean actual social isolation – now is the time for us to reach out to one another, to our neighbours and to the most vulnerable –
- For that purpose, we have a new ministry for congregational care called “Hi-Five” – we are asking parishioners to sign up to make check-in telephone calls on five other parishioners each week – The link for signing up is in the Friday Parish Email
- Third, we need you to keep supporting your church financially, to the extent you are able
- We have bills to pay – and we are committed as a church family to support people in the parish family who are experiencing economic hardship
- So I would not only ask you to continue your regular offerings to keep the church’s bills paid, but, if you are able to do so, to contribute to the Church and Charity fund we have established to help those in need.