

Refreshed in the Lord

Preached on The Fourth Sunday in Lent
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Mar. 14, 2021
Texts: Gal. 4: 21-31; John 6: 1-14

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent, often called *Laetare* Sunday, from the Latin word for “Rejoice,” which comes from today’s traditional Introit, consisting of texts from both Isaiah 66 and Psalm 122:

Rejoice ye with Jerusalem: and be ye glad for her, all ye that delight in her: exult and sing for joy with her, all ye that in sadness mourn for her that ye may suck, and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations. I was glad when they said unto me: We will go into the house of the Lord.

The other traditional name for this Sunday, less common in our circles, but more common among high church Englishmen of yesteryear, is *Dominica Refectionis*, the Sunday of Refreshment, based on our Gospel passage where Jesus refreshes the multitudes with a miraculous meal. On this, our mid-Lent Sunday, we take a little respite from our Lenten labors. The traditions associated with *Laetare* Sunday point to this respite, including the use of rose vestments (a lightening of the violet), eating of various cakes, and (in the old days) giving domestic servants a day off to visit their mothers and thus coining another name for this day, Mothering Sunday. Our Propers also reflect the respite, as the readings shift from focusing on the struggle against the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, to focusing on receiving the joyful, refreshing grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In our Collect we prayed:

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved, through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

God’s grace remains for his children, even as we are sinners. The shift of focus in today’s readings help us to remember that it is in the Lord we find our rejoicing and refreshment. We throw ourselves on God’s mercy, trusting that he will relieve us by his grace, assured by the promises of his word.

Our Epistle from Galatians 4 illustrates this assurance by contrasting the bondage that comes from being under the Law with the freedom that comes from being heirs of God’s grace. St. Paul reminds the Galatians of Abraham’s two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was the son of Hagar, the Egyptian slave. Isaac was the son of Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Ishmael was indeed a son of Abraham, but only according to the flesh. Isaac, on the other hand, was the son of the Promise, the son of the Covenant, through whom God had promised to carry out his long-term plan of redemption, a plan that unfolds through the rest of the Old Testament. St. Paul then writes in verse 24:

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem from above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written:

“Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband.”

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

Did you catch the “rejoice” theme in the passage? Without the Messiah, the Law crushes us under its holiness. It cannot give life, it cannot give freedom. Without the Messiah, we cannot truly be God’s children; we can only be his servants. We can submit, but we cannot enjoy fellowship with God; we cannot ultimately have rejoicing or refreshment. Indeed, had it not been for the promise of Messiah, woven throughout the Law, passages like the one St. Paul quotes from Isaiah 54 would be meaningless. Though we cannot keep God’s Perfect Law, God always gave it with hope. In fact, we’re told that it is by hope in the promises of the Messiah that the Old Testament saints were saved.

As for us, we have that hope realized. We have the joy and respite of the Messiah. We have tasted the grace that comes from his fulfilling of the Law, paying its penalties, redeeming us from bondage to it, and thereby enabling us to keep it with joy. And this is a significant difference between being slaves and being sons. As 19th Century Oxford Father Melville Scott writes:

Christian service is the service of sons, which is more than that of slaves. The son submits his will to his father, the slave only his outward conduct to his master... The son serves not for favour but as one in favour, not for wages but as a debtor to infinite love. While the thought of the crown before him gives him joy, his true motive is the cross behind him. That such service brings refreshment is the teaching of our Church on Refreshment Sunday [emphasis added].

In our Gospel we have St. John’s account of the feeding of the 5,000 in Chapter Six. The story is, of course, familiar to us. In fact, it’s the only story that shows up twice in our Sunday lectionary! This is also one of the few miracles that is told in all four gospels. It, too, illustrates the refreshing joy that is offered by Christ. From the other gospels we see that the miracle happened at night “in a desolate place.” The people were far from anywhere to buy food, and there was nothing nearby worth foraging. The disciples, noting the late hour, told Jesus to dismiss them so that they could go eat. But we’re told that they were in danger of fainting of hunger if Jesus sent them away. Again, we see the Lord showing his grace upon them, giving them physical refreshment, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” He said this to test him, for he himself knew what

he would do. Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"

John tells us that there were 5000 men. If we conservatively estimate that there were also 5,000 women and children, we have here a true logistical nightmare. Even the US Army cannot feed 10,000 people at a moment's notice without significant planning. Yet our Lord does so. He has designed all of the biological world to multiply naturally; and this is the kind of miracle that God does all the time, although not usually this obviously or quickly. This means that when Jesus works miraculously, he still works within the parameters of what he has already created. As St. Augustine writes, "Those five loaves were like seeds, not indeed committed to the earth, but multiplied by him who made the earth."

We also need this divine enrichment. We also need what can only be provided by the Lord. For when left to our own devices, we are similarly in the wilderness, just like the crowd in today's Gospel. We are spiritually starving and what we need cannot be supplied by our hand. We need spiritual sustenance that can only be ours if we belong to Christ. But we first must realize our hunger. This is one of the reasons we fast in Lent. We use our physical hunger to show us our spiritual hunger, a hunger not met by the natural world, a hunger for the Spirit of Christ.

Back in Verse 4, St. John tells us that this miracle happened around the time of the Passover. The Venerable Bede reminds us that this is a year before our Lord's passion and crucifixion. Whenever you see Passover in the Bible, you should look for ways that the Passover points to the greater Exodus, when the Lord himself became our Passover Lamb. Theologians have often found this passage to be a foreshadowing of the sacrament of Holy Communion. After all, when Jesus "had given thanks" before the miracle, the Greek word used by St. John is *eukaristasas*, where we get our word eucharist. This is even more evident in light of the later part of the chapter, when Jesus tells the people that he is the bread of life. We read in Verse 51:

[Jesus said] "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."

And here we have our spiritual refreshment. Our catechism tells us that the benefits of partaking in the Lord's Supper are "The strengthening and refreshing of our souls by

the Body and Blood of Christ, as our bodies are by the Bread and Wine.” When we hunger for Jesus, he feeds us with himself, giving us life, strength, and spiritual refreshment. The joy from encountering our Lord in Word and Sacrament gives us the boost we need in Lent, but also in our entire lives.

What do we do, though, when most of the parish cannot partake of the Sacrament? What if you can only participate in today’s worship virtually? In that case, please remember the fact of “spiritual Communion” to which Bishop Marsh has referred, described below:

If you do truly repent of your sins, and steadfastly believe that Jesus Christ hath suffered death upon the Cross for you, and shed his Blood for your redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits you hath thereby...you do eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to your soul’s health, although you do not receive the Sacrament with your mouth.

In other words, the means by which we receive the “inward and spiritual grace” of the Sacrament is faith, and we can receive that grace even if we cannot partake of the “outward and visible sign” of the bread and wine. While this is not at all ideal, nor is it normative, it is still a comfort in these extraordinary times. Meditating on the miracles and teachings of John 6 and how they relate to the Sacrament is a good way to partake of this spiritual Communion. And on top of that, as we build up hunger for the fullness of the Sacrament, it will make it sweeter all-the-more when we can resume Communion as normal.

The thing about hunger is that it presupposes that there is food somewhere. The same is true for spiritual hunger. So, by all means, enjoy your spiritual refreshment today. Refresh yourself in the Joy of the Lord by feasting on his Word, by remembering what it is to be a son or daughter rather than a slave, by meditating on his sacrifice as you look forward to returning to his Table, and by remembering the relief and comfort of God’s grace on this Sunday of Rejoicing.

In the Name...