

## Lent 4 – Mothering Sunday 2017

“Jerusalem which is above is free; which is the mother of us all.” (Galatians 4.26)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Today marks the half-way point of the Lenten Season. We have completed three weeks, and we have three weeks to go. Our focus thus far has been our spiritual development; growing in faith and repentance; drawing nearer to, and having a closer walk with, the Lord. In a word, our focus has been our ‘sanctification’ – our progress in holiness.

To that end, the Gospels for the first three Sundays have each dealt with devils. For example, on the First Sunday in Lent, we saw the Lord Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by the devil; on the Second Sunday, we read the encounter between Him and the woman of Canaan whose daughter was “grievously vexed with a devil”; and last Sunday, it was the man who could not speak because of the demon within him.

In each case, Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, was victorious. In each case, He demonstrated the authority and power of God the Holy Trinity by defeating Satan or casting out the demon. And by doing so, we may be encouraged in our own temptations and spiritual battles. We are not alone. The Lord of Heaven and earth is with us and, through His Incarnation, Suffering, Death and Resurrection, He has assured us of His ability to save us and deliver us from the attacks of our enemy. Alleluia!

This morning’s Gospel emphasizes this indirectly through the feeding of the five thousand-plus souls. It is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. A huge crowd of people had followed Jesus to what a couple of the Gospels call “a lonely place”. St. Luke says it was the town of Bethsaida. Some scholars think the people could have walked nine miles in order to be with Jesus. In any case, it had been a long day of travelling, teaching and healing, and we can only try to imagine the individual circumstances and situations that were present amongst all those people: the sicknesses; the physical disabilities; those in pain; others in mental anguish; some who would have been demon-possessed; the fearful; those who were depressed. St. Mark’s account says that Jesus “had compassion on them,

because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (6.34). That says a lot – sheep without a shepherd.

Of course, there are times when we have felt this way, like a sheep without a shepherd. There are those times when everything seems to be closing in on us. Nothing is going right; in fact, circumstances are in reverse from bad to worse; and we feel alone and abandoned. These times happen even when we are trying our best; and, sometimes they come upon us without any fault of our own. All of a sudden – bang! – a sickness; an accident; a set-back arrives out of the blue. In those cases, as the Collect two weeks ago said, “we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves”. In an instant – overnight – everything changes, and there we are, totally dependent and in need like the people in this morning’s Gospel.

But that’s the point! What this morning’s Gospel is showing us is that we are just people. This is our human condition. We *are* needy and totally dependent. We cannot save ourselves no matter how hard we try. We require an intervention – a Divine intervention. We need Jesus, the One Who is the Stronger Man from last week’s Gospel. Our sins and short-comings – all of our human defects – have rendered us spiritually hungry and weak. So we can see ourselves in that crowd.

The critical thing to understand is that this is not just about a little boy’s bread and fish. It is about the Body and Blood of Christ. Using the occasion of this gathering, we are shown that the food every human being desperately needs is the Bread of Life. That’s what today’s Gospel is about. Jesus has the supply of bread required. Indeed He is Himself the Source. He miraculously multiplied the five barley loaves because He is the One through Whom all things were made in Heaven and in earth. He is the Second Person of the Trinity, the God- Man, the Saviour of the world. “I am the Bread of Life,” Jesus tells us. “He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst” (St. John 6.35).

There is a preview in today’s Gospel. It is subtle, but real nonetheless. When Jesus took the little boy’s loaves and gave thanks to God, and broke them, He was doing what He would do at the Passover Meal on the night before His Crucifixion. He would take the bread and give thanks and say, “This is my Body given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me”.

In spite of our best efforts, we cannot fix our human condition. Through the sin of Adam and Eve, and through our own sins, we are fallen and flawed. We are

spiritually hungry. We are in constant need of a constant supply of God's hope, forgiveness, love and assurance. In His infinite mercy, our Heavenly Father has supplied all of this through His Son, Jesus Christ. This is the point of the Gospel. The multitude was fed – not because they arranged for a caterer, and not because somebody went fishing and got a big catch and shared it. No, they were fed and satisfied by the grace and goodness of Almighty God.

Christ came down from Heaven, not because we deserved Him, but because of His mercy. He subjected Himself to humiliation and shame and suffering, not because we had done something special, but simply because of God's grace. He submitted Himself to the agony of torture, and shed His precious Blood on the Cross, to provide the full and perfect Sacrifice for our sins – not because we are worthy, but because He is gracious.

In a recent CBC interview, Church of England Priest and Poet, Malcom Guite described grace as God's unwillingness to accept human failure. That definition seems to fit well with St. Paul told the Church in Rome. He said, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". (3.23-24)

"Jerusalem which is above is free," wrote St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians. In other words, it is God's gift to us. We do not deserve it. We cannot earn it. The door of Heaven is opened to us only because of what Jesus has done. This is life-changing and life-giving News. May we be moved to repentance and faith by God's goodness through His Son.

As we close, there is a side-bar that deserves mention. It is a point on our response to God's grace – about His unwillingness to accept our failures and short-comings. William Barclay, a Church of Scotland Minister who taught at the University of Glasgow, urged readers to consider the boy in today's Gospel. He wrote:

"He had not much to offer but in what he had Jesus found the materials for a miracle. (Mysteriously), Jesus needs what we can bring Him. It may not be much but He needs it. It may well be that the world is denied miracle after miracle, and triumph after triumph because we will not bring to Jesus what we have and what we are. If we would lay ourselves on the altar of His service, there is no saying what He could do with us and through us. We may be sorry and embarrassed that

we have not more to bring; but that is no reason for bringing what we have. Little is always much in the hands of Christ.”

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...