

Lay Preachers' Bulletin – March 2021

March's lectionary notes have been provided by Fr. Matthew Perreault, Curate – All Saints, Cochrane.

March 7, 2021 – Lent 3

Exodus 20:1-17

Psalm 19

I Corinthians 1:18-25

John 2:13-22

Father of mercy, alone we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves. When we are discouraged by our weakness, strengthen us to follow Christ, our pattern and our hope; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This Third Sunday in Lent draws upon multiple themes of law and grace, through the use of the Old Testament lesson's recitation of the ten commandments, while the theme of grace is taken up in the Epistle from I Corinthians, which thematically ties in most fully to the Collect of the Day. The theme is taken up less fully in the Johannine account of the cleansing of the Temple. As such, the Epistle seems the best place to begin for a thematic sermon.

For S. Paul, Jews and Gentiles sought different things, signs and wisdom (v. 22) in order to prove the authenticity and apostolicity of his message. We see the Jewish desire for signs in the Gospel passage, but for Jews this question of wisdom (*gnosis*) is addressed here.

S. Paul challenges both of these in a sense, though, and says that the Cross itself is both the power (*dynamis*) and wisdom of God. It is not power in the way we think of power. It is not wisdom in the way we think of wisdom. Indeed it is even foolishness to those who do not have faith and believe, but when interpreted by faith and belief, the Cross truly becomes the power of God that subverts the wisdom of the age.

There is a reminder here that we are not to rely on ourselves. The cross is the subversion of *human* wisdom and *human* power. “Father of mercy, we have no power to help ourselves,” is the beginning of our collect. This theme is built upon further in v. 22, “For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” We might think of the famous CS Lewis quotation from *Surprised by Joy*, “The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men,” as a corollary of S. Paul’s statement. In either case we are shown human limitations and our absolute need for God’s grace in our lives.

There are several ways this could be approached in a Lenten context in 2021:

- In mid-Lent, a reminder that our ability to follow our Lenten disciplines is not a matter of personal power and discipline, but rather of the grace of God who guides us. It is Christ who cleanses us from sin, not our own ability to refrain from sinning. This can also be encouragement for those who have struggled or perhaps even given up on a Lenten discipline: take heart, and ask God for divine assistance in following through on this Lenten discipline.
- Faith as the foundation for true wisdom. Sometimes we cannot figure it all out because the Truth of God is beyond human understanding, to the point that, “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.” Faith tells us that the statement is true and leads us to
- The Cross as the sign of God’s power and wisdom, drawing also from the second part of the Collect, “our pattern and our hope.” If the Cross is the sign of that power and wisdom, then we should seek to ourselves be ‘cruci-formed’—that is shaped by the cross. This idea would be particularly appropriate if the themes of the Cross have been taken up in either or both the first and second Sundays in Lent.

March 14, 2021 – Lent 4

Number 21:4-9

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-20

Ephesians 2:1-10

John 3:1-14

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came from heaven to be the true bread which gives life to the world, evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

The reading in Numbers directly prefigures the beginning of our Gospel reading this Sunday, and so commends itself to preaching from the Gospel, though the Lesson itself is also extremely preachable. The two approaches are outlined below:

The preaching of the Old Testament lesson focuses on the incarnation of Jesus and the way in which he gives us the bread of life.

In this we might think of these principal points:

- God commands the image of a *snake* to be made in order to save the people from the deadly *snakes* which had been sent to render judgement.
- There are many examples of healing in Scripture. Jesus commands the lame to walk, and opens the eyes of the blind. The Apostles similarly heal in the name of Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles. In the Old Testament, prayers and the burning of incense heal, except in a few interesting exceptions. A poultice of figs heals King Hezekiah, Naaman is healed by washing in the Jordan, and lastly the bronze serpent.
 - Balms were a common healing practice, washing in the Jordan makes some sense to cure leprosy, even if we do not consider it as prefiguring Holy Baptism, but the use of the bronze snake takes more explanation.

- Why a snake? The snake is symbolic of sin and death, and the curse of the earth (Genesis 3)
- He takes the symbol of death and judgement and turns it into something that would heal. This is paralleled in the incarnation when Jesus takes on human flesh, redeemed it, and by faith made it something that would heal all of us.
- S. Gregory of Naziansus once said “that which He has not assumed He has not healed.” (Epistle 101.5) In other words flesh saves flesh.
- Lent is not just about the Cross, but we are called to remember the whole redemptive power of the incarnation. God assumes humanity to redeem it, and so we look up to the Lamb of Calvary, lifted up on the Cross, that our flesh might be healed.

Alternatively, the homily could continue the theme of the Cross itself from the Gospel:

In this week’s Gospel, we see the cross presented as the fulfilment of the love of God for humanity. This sermon might be aided with contextualization of the first part of the Gospel discourse with Nicodemus which describes the regeneration of the person through Holy Baptism. The passage today omits this first part of the discourse, and begins with Christ making the claim that the rebirth by the Spirit can occur only after the ‘lifting up’ of the Son of Man (v. 14). This is obviously in reference to Christ’s crucifixion, and so leads to reflection on the nature of the power of the cross to lead to regeneration through Holy Baptism.

There are several presentations of atonement in the New Testament, and this one from the words of Jesus is perhaps sometimes overlooked. The sight of Jesus on the Cross has the power to bring people to faith and repentance (think for instance of the centurion who says, “Truly this man was God’s Son.” S. Mark 15.39).

This emphasis on S. John 3. 14 provides the clearest tie-in with the Collect’s theme of Jesus being the Bread of Life who gives true life to the world. The

Collect would normally evoke thoughts of the Prophet Isaiah for an Old Testament reading and the Bread of Life discourse in S. John 6, and so it would be wise to carefully consider instead this appointed reading from Christ's discourse with Nicodemus, as it lends further emphasis to this imagery.

While perhaps not intellectually satisfying as a full theological theory of the atonement, this image has strong devotional value and connects well with themes raised by S. Paul and the power of the crucified Christ (think Galatians 3.1ff). The Christ Crucified is the image and fulfilment of the love of God for humanity, and gazing upon and reflecting upon the suffering and crucified Christ leads to repentance of sin, faith, and devotion. This is an opportunity to highlight therefore the devotional value of a crucifix displaying the suffering Christ, in which we do not skip over that suffering in order to contemplate the triumph of the cross, but rather in which we recognize the fullness of the Gospel's message that, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son."

The love of God is fulfilled in the crucifixion, the suffering of Christ is an image of that love, and its power is to confront us with the repentance of our sins and renewal of our faith. This theme ties in well also with the opening lines from our Epistle that describes how God is rich and mercy and love for humanity.

March 21, 2021 – Lent 5

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalms 51:1-13 or Psalm 119:9-16

Hebrews 5:5-10

John 12:20-33

Most merciful God, by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ, you created humanity anew. May the power of his victorious cross transform those who turn in faith to him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Each of the passages this week provides a reflection on an aspect of the cross. For instance, in the Lesson we see the cross as the fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophesy of a new Covenant. This might be a particularly fruitful exposition if it follows the similar theme from the Fourth Sunday in Lent's propers. The Epistle brings with it the possibility of preaching on Christ's submission to God's will and therefore introduces the concept of self-emptying to the Collect's theme of death and new creation.

The Gospel more directly plays into the theme of the Collect, however, by speaking of the possibility of salvation being offered to anyone who turns to Christ in faith. This seems a fruitful area of exposition given the other cruciformed themes in the previous Sundays propers.

The Gospel centres on two related expositions of the cross from Jesus. First, he uses the metaphor of a grain of wheat being required to die to bring forth fruit (v. 24) and that by being lifted up (see the discussion on the Fourth Sunday in Lent), he would draw all people to himself (v. 32).

The general outline of this sermon might involve:

- With a few notable exceptions (the Syrophenician woman; the Centurion), the ministry of Christ (both his miracles and his teachings) had been for the Jews. So it is interesting that in our passage it is the Greeks who are asking about wanting to see Jesus.
- Jesus' response does not indicate any hesitancy to respond, as he did in his other encounters with gentiles, rather his pronouncements are his response to their request.
- Their request to 'see' him is treated by Jesus similarly to requests from Jews for a sign. The Greeks are asking to participate in the salvation of the Messiah. In this context the pronouncements make sense.
- His first response in v. 23 contains the theme of the importance of death (his own) and death to self (ours). A very close tie-in with the Collect.

- In order for the grain of wheat to bring forth fruit, by bringing all people to redemption with God, the Son of Man must be lifted up, or his second pronouncement (v. 32).
- Christ models the death to self in terms of his self-humbling/emptying and death on the cross. We hear echoes of the Garden of Gethsemane in v.27 and Christ's prayer that the cup be taken from him if it is the Father's will. Here he, reflecting on his imminent crucifixion asks if he should ask the Father to save him, but responds that no, he must do his Father's will for the sake of all people.
- There is an overall clear progression through this point from the explanation of what is happening to an application today: Christ is calling each of us to take up our crosses, whatever that might look like, in order to follow him. Death to the old self, in order to have eternal life.

March 28, 2021 – Sunday of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 14:1-15:47 or 15:1-39 (40-47)

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for all our human race you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take our flesh and suffer death upon a cruel cross. May we share in the glory of his great humility, and share in the glory of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Please note: Traditionally if the Liturgy of the Palms is added, it is still considered a separate liturgical action, and its readings are not used for preaching, as it would be disruptive to the change from the triumphal entry of the liturgy of the Palms to the themes of Passion Sunday itself. The

readings of the day proper are to be used for whatever sermon is preached. The BAS provides instructions for when the Eucharist follows; in the event that Morning Prayer follows, the preces and Invitatory are omitted, and the service begins with the Psalms. Even if a procession is omitted or de-emphasized this year due to worship restrictions, the station Collect (Almighty God, whose Son was crucified...) should not be omitted as it forms a transition from the Liturgy of the Palms to Passion Sunday, particularly if using Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer where the Collect of the Day follows much later in the liturgy. Care should be taken in choosing appropriate canticles that reflect the theme of the Passion and not the triumphal entry.

The readings for Passion Sunday provide a rich set of texts from which to preach, but given that Good Friday uses the Johanine account of the Passion, Passion Sunday is commended for preaching the Synoptic Passion narratives. This is, in a way, a culmination of the Markan narrative from this part of the year's lectionary cycle, and it does it a disservice to ignore the distinctives of the Markan narrative.

The Markan text has an apologetic flavour to it that aids us in a direction perhaps not so much of reflecting on application (which has likely been done well in the past five Sundays of Lenten cross-themed preaching, and will be done again on Good Friday), but rather to, as the collect of the Liturgy of the Palms prays, reflect upon "those mighty acts whereby you give us life and immortality." This possibility could perhaps best be taken advantage of by shortening the homily slightly and announcing a time of silent reflection, as permitted in the rubrics, at the conclusion of the homily before the service continues.

S. Mark's account of the Passion contains within it a number of concurrent themes and messages. There is an apologetic flavour to it which is seen in the references to Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. When it states that they parted his garments (v. 24) and he is crucified alongside two bandits and thus numbered with transgressors (v. 27), there is a question being asked and answered. How could the Holy One of God have suffered crucifixion, a

punishment reserved for only the most heinous criminals? Answer: That is the picture of the righteous one of God given in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53.

While this is an interesting point, the second concurrent narrative intermingled with this narrative is perhaps of greater interest for devotional reflection, and thus the focus of a homily. This second narrative sees Jesus' death not only as that of the righteous suffering servant, but also as an conflict between the forces of light and darkness.

The loud cry of Jesus at his death (v. 37) is a cry of triumph following the agony of crucifixion, the agony expressed in his quoting of Psalm 22 (v. 34). The cry is an announcement of victory of light over darkness, which is followed and reinforced immediately by the rending of the curtain of the temple. We see this triumph explained the *Carmen Christi* hymn from our Epistle reading: "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Philippians 2.9-11) In it we see the cross as the both the nadir and climax of the incarnation. God condescends to be known by humanity by the second person of the Trinity taking on humanity, emptying himself and humbling himself before the Father. Though he is righteous, he takes the sins of the world upon himself, and by his death, claims victory over death, redeeming all of humanity. This perfectly highlights the deeply ethical and cosmic-eschatological tones that are uniquely a part of the Markan Passion narrative.