

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 22, 2009

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent is just past the halfway point towards Easter. It has been observed historically as a relaxation of the Lenten fast. It is called Refreshment Sunday, after the gospel feeding (John 6:1f) and Mothering Sunday, after the reference to Jerusalem above as our mother in the epistle (Gal. 5:21f.). In some places, rose colored vestments are worn—but they just look pink to me, so we've not adopted that practice here.

The idea is that we are just past halfway; so we pause in rest and anticipation, enjoying a small foretaste of the coming feast. This is, in fact, a perspective on life in general. The good things in life are always as an anticipation of the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

We are always looking forward to something: college, career, marriage, a vacation, retirement, some event, the completion of a project. The funny thing is that we keep looking forward even after the thing arrives. Having reached one goal, we begin to look forward to something else.

This is a lesson. Nothing in this life fulfills us in a final way. Every fulfillment gives way to new desires and new expectations. The lesson is that the things we look forward to are not meant to fulfill us. They are supposed to keep us looking forward, beyond themselves, to God.

This perspective actually helps us to enjoy things more. Once we understand that the relationship, or the job, or the adventure was not meant to be the ultimate thing, we can enjoy it for what it is; a sacramental sign, a consolation on the pathway to resurrection, which is the ultimate thing.

And we can also deal with disappointment. If we fail to obtain something we looked forward to, we know it wasn't the ultimate thing. By faith, we know that the things we desired may not have been the best things for us. We can accept the good that God gives us instead of the good we wanted.

We can understand the present as a taste of the future because we are already risen with Christ in baptism, even as we await our physical resurrection on the last day. Jesus said that those who believe in him "[have] eternal life, and he will raise [us] up at the last day" (John 6:40). The Christian life is a balance between fulfillment and anticipation. We have something already, even as we wait for the full measure of it.

Thus, anticipation is mixed with contentment. This is a theme of today's gospel (John 6:1f.). The gospel begins with need. There are many hungry people and there are meager resources to feed them. But Jesus is there. By his divine power, he makes the food sufficient for all.

The gospel is an image of the kingdom of God. The multitudes of Israel are gathered around the Messiah for a meal. This looks forward to the future banquet of the kingdom when all of God's people will be gathered around the King. Of course, the meal in the kingdom will be better supplied, no doubt with some of the good wine that Jesus is able to make. The feeding is a taste and an anticipation of the kingdom, just as the sacrament is a taste of that same meal, but not yet its fullness.

Life is like that. God gives us enough of his grace now. He gives us enough of what we need to be content in the present. But, since we know that there is more to come, our contentment is mixed with anticipation.

God gives us enough of what we need even when it seems like we don't have enough of what we need. The secret of today's gospel is that when Jesus is present, there is always enough. St. Paul explains this truth in Philippians. He says,

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11-13 NKJV).

St. Paul did not say that the conditions of hunger and need were ideal. He said they were tolerable because Christ was with him. The measure of Christ's presence that he experienced in need made him content in the present moment and pointed him forward to the coming kingdom when there will be no more need.

It may be evident from this discussion that some sense of need is necessary to point us to the kingdom. When we have less than we want, we are more aware of our need for God. When we have all we need, there is a tendency to forget the Lord our God who brought us out of Egypt (Deuteronomy 6:10-12). In our fullness, we mistake the things for the ultimate thing.

This leads to the strange logic of Lent. We create need or want in order to find Christ. The sacramental perspective on life always enjoys the feast. But, in this world, it can't be a never ending feast; that will become mere gluttony. In this world, the feast requires the fast. We must discover our emptiness before Christ can fill it. And when we are full of the wrong things, we must empty ourselves of them in order to find Christ. We may not love Lent. We may not love fasting, but wisdom teaches us that we need them both.

Now we have fasted for twenty-two of the forty days. Easter is in view. We are content because we can do all things through Christ. Yet, we look forward to the feast.

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