

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 18, 2007

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“Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all” (from the epistle Galatians 4:21f.).

We are just past the midway point in Lent. There is light at the end of the tunnel. The mood today is less dark. Today is the first Lenten Sunday in which the devil or the demons were not present in the gospel. The focus of our lessons is on freedom and Christ.

Freedom means different things to different people. For some, freedom means the ability to do whatever they want to do without regard to law or principle. Christian freedom means something different. It means that we are free to obey the law of God because we are no longer slaves to the world, the flesh and the devil. We are no longer captive to our fallen and disordered desires.

Wisdom teaches us that the person who thinks he is free to do as he pleases is really a slave to his desires. He is free to do as he pleases, but he is not free to deny himself for some greater good. As 2 Peter says of the apostles of false freedom, “They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved” (2:19 RSV).

In Lent, we do without things in order to gain new freedom by gaining new control over our desires. Wisdom teaches us that unless we are free to say no to something, we are not free to say yes to it. Saying no to things for a while—i.e. fasting—helps us to return to those things with greater detachment and, thus, greater genuine pleasure.

But abstaining from things is only half of the equation. If our Lent—or our faith—is only a list of rules of things we can and can’t do, we will have fallen into the religious slavery that St. Paul is talking about in the epistle. We cannot be saved by rules of fasting. We can only be saved by Jesus.

We turn from things in order to turn towards Jesus, who sustains us in the desert places. This is the point of our gospel. In the feeding miracle, Jesus led the people to a place where there was no food in order to reveal himself to them as the source of genuine fulfillment. Their fast led them to Christ. If our fast does not lead us to Christ, there is no purpose to our fasting.

If we were to look at the world with perfect eyes of faith, we would see Christ in everything. We would see all of creation as a sign of the Creator. We would partake of God’s good gifts with thanksgiving. We would reject any use of—we would fast from—any created thing that was not in God’s will.

But when our eyes are blinded, we see the world and the things in it as ends in and of themselves. This divorce of the creation from the Creator is the root of idolatry. We see this in the way our culture is pre-occupied with the pursuit of sex and pleasure without any regard for God’s will. We see it in the way that money is a goal without any regard for people or the goodness and quality of the products. These are variant forms of idol worship.

And they are variant pathways to the common end of spiritual death. The idol promises much but gives back little. We are invited to come, indulge and be filled. However, the more we pursue fulfillment through things, the more empty we become.

Thus, the heart of the Christian year is the Lenten fast, in which we detach ourselves from things and discover a new sense of fullness. Jesus takes us to the place where there is no food in order to reveal himself to us as the source of genuine fulfillment—indeed, as the source of life. As Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall never hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (6:35).

The goal of Lent, and of the practice of fasting in general, is not an extreme asceticism in which we come to abhor the creation. The goal is contentment, in which we can rejoice in both Lent and Easter. In Lent we rejoice that Christ is present in our emptiness. In Easter, we rejoice that Christ is present in the feast.

In Philippians, St. Paul describes the ideal. He writes, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content...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).

We learn this contentment in the Eucharist. We come here to fill the hunger for God that lies behind all desire. When that hunger is filled, we can handle every other thing.