

Lent 1 Feb. 22 2014

Last week I spoke about the fifty day period before Easter that was formerly known by the old Latin name Quinquagesima. Well, now, since Ash Wednesday this past week we have entered into the forty day period we know much better as Lent. These are the days of penitence and preparation before Holy Week, readying ourselves for the time of Jesus' passion and resurrection. The origins of Lent go very deep into the history of the Church. It was a period set aside for the final preparations for those who were to be baptized. A forty day period of prayer and fasting for the new converts to solidify their faith. Over time, others began to join in too, to mark these days with special prayer and fasting, both in solidarity with those who were preparing for baptism; but soon they found that this forty days of prayer and fasting was very good for their own spiritual lives as well, and thus the season of Lent became widespread throughout the church.

Prayer: Most merciful God, as we begin our Lenten pilgrimage, may your Word illuminate and guide our steps; this we ask in the Name of Jesus our Savior and friend. Amen.

I find a much greater continuity in the shifting of our Church seasons this year than I have in past years because we have spent the season of Epiphany looking very closely at our Baptismal ministry. Through out this Epiphany season we recited the Baptismal covenant every week and together in our worship and Bible Studies we reflected on how our Baptisms have shaped our faith, our lives and our very spirits. Since Lent, as I just mentioned, originally was meant as a preparatory period of those to be baptized at Easter, all of our concentration on baptism during Epiphany has made this transition into Lent much more natural this year.

This morning on this first Sunday in Lent, we are doing things a little bit differently: we began our worship chanting the Great Litany. This is a series of prayers and supplications developed by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer for the first Book of Common Prayer, to be used in churches to call people back to a deeper sense of their faith, in difficult times for the nation and in times of natural disasters. It seemed fitting that on this First Sunday of Lent, we should on again recite the Great Litany as a traditional call for ourselves to live deeper in our faith. We also read the lessons in the King James Version of the Bible, again a much more traditional approach than we usually hear on Sundays mornings. Although some of the language might not be quite as familiar to us, there is a power and beauty in the King James Version that is worth remembering and sometimes hearing the Scriptures in a different translation can help us to be opened up to a new perspective in the sacred writings. Finally, we will celebrate the Holy Eucharist together with Rite 1, prayers that are based on the older forms from previous generations of worship. The Rite 1 prayers contain all the "thees" and "thou hasts" are sound so ancient to our modern ears; but even deeper, I believe, is the theology behind the Eucharist prayers in Rite 1 is a good bit more penitential than we encounter in our more modern Eucharistic prayers. Rite 1 Eucharistic prayers especially recall our need for repentance and for turning our lives around.

Admittedly, the Rite 1 Eucharistic prayers can be a little morbidly focused on our nature a miserable sinners...they certainly often have that sort of a sensibility to modern ears, but I don't think they are actually meant to simply leave that impression. Rather than dwelling in a morbid manner on our sinful nature, instead, I believe that the Rite 1 prayers are calling us back to faithfulness of life with God and in the community of the church...the sense underlying this outlook is that we have become distant to God, we have turned our backs on God, or even lost our awareness of God in our lives: the point of the prayer in the Rite 1 Eucharist is for us to turn back to God and to live. Thus there is actually something very hopeful and even joyous about this: it is about turning our lives around, getting them back on the right track. Part of this is about getting our priorities straight: actually putting time and effort into what really matters in our lives, our relationship to God, our relationships with our families and friends, our care and concern for the earth and environmental stewardship, putting time and effort into caring for the least of these, for the poor, homeless and hungry and also for

challenging and changing the conditions that keep them in poverty and destitution. And this, this my sisters and brothers is Good News for us here in this Lenten season!

We began the Lenten season this past week on Ash Wednesday. I noted in my homily that the ritual of placing ashes on our foreheads is as a sign of our mortal nature, but this isn't the easiest thing to market, going around telling people that "You are going to die!" Of course, everybody knows this, but who wants to be reminded about it, especially in the middle of the week on a Wednesday for God's sake?!! And especially on a cold Wednesday in the middle of February!! Terrible marketing plan!! But the point of the ashes is not just to show our mortality, but also to remind us that we can live fully in God through Christ Jesus. As we were reminded last Sunday, and as we started off the season of Epiphany back at the beginning of January, we hear again this morning in the Gospel lesson from Mark, that Jesus is proclaimed the Beloved: And as Jesus is God's beloved, so are we too beloved of God in our own baptisms.

But even though we are God's beloved, it does not mean that we are not assailed by temptations and doubts. We hear this morning in the Gospel lesson that Jesus is tempted by Satan for forty days and that he comes out of that period ready to fulfill his mission; he comes out of the forty days in the wilderness and proclaims the good news of God, saying, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." But that's Jesus: we are just now entering into the wilderness, just now embarking on the forty day journey of Lent. We have just started out, only a few days ago remembering the full extent of our mortality. And as we move into Lent we become more aware of the ways in which we fall short of the glory of God: as we consider how God has loved us and how God has called us into God's loving service, all the more we realize all too often we have cut our selves off from God's love; all too often we see that we are alienated, estranged and that we have distanced our selves from God. And we do this in the most perverse ways: we forget God's promise given to Noah and we ignore Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom and we complain that God has abandon us even when God is right there supporting us with life and blessing; we act as if God's call to us to serve others in the name of the Risen Christ is burden rather than true and perfect freedom; we secretly believe that all our blessings are the result of our own hard work and suffering rather than the free gift of God's amazing grace. In these ways great and small, in this fashion and in oh so many other ways we try to separate ourselves from the love of God in Christ Jesus our savior. And then, of course, we act so lost and helpless, so pitiful. But all the time, all the time, despite our charades and shenanigans, God is right there with us, always patiently upholding us and always ready to be the pillar of strength we really need.

This is where once again it is appropriate for us to focus more upon our baptismal life: as we heard from the First Letter of Peter, indeed, baptism now saves us, saves us not from washing us clean, as it were, as much as setting out minds firmly in Christ, as the epistle says, "as an appeal to God for a good conscience," that we may overcome the estrangement and alienation, that we can come closer to God and to God's will for our lives, that in keeping a Holy Lent we break down the barriers between ourselves and God's people, seeking to serve christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves and thereby coming more fully into our identity as the Beloved of God in Christ Jesus.

As we begin this Lenten season 2015, we begin by embracing some of our church's traditional forms of worship and liturgical expression, but please do not let the ancient solemnities distract you from the new thing God is bringing to pass in our lives right now: how God is calling us and drawing us to God's own self now, how God is blessing us and overcoming the separation between us and the divine by refusing to acknowledge our alienation and estrangement, how God is beckoning us into a future replete with the possibilities of God's justice, peace and love for our world. And so, my sisters and brothers, we will continue our Lenten worship, but let us do so in the knowledge and full awareness of God's call to us to renew our faith, to turn again to God for life and hope and love. Thanks be to God for this great grace. Amen.