

Lent I (26 February 2023)

“Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation;) giving no offense in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed: but in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses...”

+In the Name...

A Mormon priest, a Southern Baptist pastor, and a United Methodist minister walk into a bar... Unfortunately, that is as far as the joke goes, in case you were waiting for a snappy punchline. Given that none of the three should be in a bar at all, based on the teachings on alcohol of their respective denominations.

It just seems that the Kalendar is having a perfect convergence of different priestly emphases: Friday was the Feast of St. Matthias. Today's Epistle foreshadows the Ember Days which we will celebrate later this week. Sprinkle into this the death of our metropolitan, Abp.

Upham, and it seems that I would be negligent if I did not preach on the Holy priesthood this morning!

St. Matthias was chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot among the Twelve Apostles, the predecessors of the Church's bishops. As I said in last week's sermon, the Christian Church is the heir to, or the fulfillment of, the Jewish Church. Our Lord was a "member in good standing", if you will, of Judaism. Both Judaism and Christianity have a priesthood, which are similar but also have key differences. The Jewish Temple had the Aaronic priesthood, based on the lineage of Aaron, brother of Moses. All the priests were members of one tribe, the Levites, and it was passed on from father to son. Of course, one can see the problem when a son is forced into the occupation of his father, especially when it is a vocation, like the priesthood. I would not be a priest today, because I would be a

machinist. But then my father would not have been a machinist because he would have been a Standard Oil Executive. And so on.

Our Lord, however, was not of the tribe of Levi, and therefore cannot be of the Aaronic or Levitical priesthood. The Aaronic priesthood was destined to pass away but the Psalms and St. Paul's letter to the Hebrews refer to Him being "a priest forever after the order of Melchisedec", a mysterious figure first mentioned in Genesis. He was a king in Salem, which scholars believe likely referred to Jerusalem. (Sorry, Oregon.)

Jesus was prophet, priest and king. In His role as priest, He reconciled mankind to God. The Old Testament priest of the Temple did that by sacrificing animals to God. Christ did it by offering Himself to God on the Cross. A priest in the Church today does it by re-presenting Christ's Sacrifice in the Holy Communion.

Jesus chose twelve Apostles to run the Church after He ascended into Heaven. The Apostles, likewise, chose a replacement when Judas hanged himself, perhaps somewhat oddly to our contemporary standards by casting lots and asking God to bless that method to choose a successor. (No, the APCCK will not be casting lots to choose Abp. Upham's successor!) "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and ordained you," Jesus told His apostles, indicating that the priesthood is not a creation of mankind, but from God. The priest represents mankind to God and God to mankind. Liturgically, notice that when the priest faces the altar he is speaking to God on behalf of the congregation. When he faces the people, he is speaking to the congregation on behalf of God. The priest acts in the person of Christ, which should be a very humbling thought to any man called by God to the priesthood.

Christ promised to the Apostles, as recorded at the end of the Gospel according to St. Matthew that He would be with them always until the end of the world. God knew that the Apostles would not live forever, so there had to be a plan in place to keep the Church going. We call this “apostolic succession”. From early on in the history of the Church, three bishops were ordinarily required in order to consecrate another bishop. This way, if one bishop were to lose his marbles, he could not go gallivanting around the countryside consecrating other men as bishops who were just as crazy as he was. I was ordained by Bp. Daren Williams. He was consecrated by Bishops Stewart, Langberg and Moyer. Each of those three was in turn consecrated by three bishops, as were they all the way back to the original 12 apostles. Not all parts of the Church that use the term “bishop” maintain apostolic succession, but the three branches of the Church Catholic: Anglican, Roman and Eastern, do. This maintains a

continuity that assures us of Christ's authority. Christ's authority assures us of valid Sacraments. Valid Sacraments assure us of the graces Christ promised when He instituted those Sacraments some 2,000 years ago. The early church fathers were very insistent on loyalty to one's bishop, because the bishop was the guardian of the Truth.

As the Church grew, the Apostles needed others to help in the handing down of the faith. They chose elders, presbyters in Greek, from which we get the English word priest. Eventually the priests would outnumber the bishops, but they were limited in the number of Sacraments they could confect. An additional order, the Deacons, were limited even further in their functions. But all authority rested with the bishops: a bishop can do anything a priest is allowed to do, and both a priest and a bishop can do anything a deacon is allowed to do. In addition, the role of the Bishop is a teaching office as well:

teaching the True faith as once delivered unto the Saints. The priests are delegated to teach at the local level, but in the name of the Bishop. Remember how when the last Rector of this Parish resigned, the Bishop became the de facto Rector until the Parish called a new Rector. But even that call could only be made with the approval of the Bishop Ordinary.

Lest you think this sermon is just to draw attention to how wonderful the clergy are, you have our epistle to point out what some of the clergy have to endure: St. Paul included an auto-biographical list: imprisonments, long-suffering, dishonor, deceivers; the list is ongoing. Our archbishop was no exception. The devil has been working hard to destroy the Church since Her beginning, and he seems to have a special interest in destroying the Continuing Church. But we should take it as a compliment that he would think enough of us to want to destroy us. We must be on the right track in preaching the Gospel, or

else the devil would not waste his time with us. I mean, why should he hinder someone who is of no threat to him? I remember in my youth a pastor referring to the ministry as a “meat grinder”. I think it was on the heels of a particularly raucous row in our congregation. But regardless, Abp. Upham had his share of challenges.

So I ask you in your prayers this week, especially as we come to the Ember Days, remember the members of the clergy in your prayers: First, those who have gone on to their reward: Fr. Osborn, Fr. Frane, Abp. Upham: that they may hear those golden words: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” Second, those who are actively serving: they have been called by God... to wear a target on their backs! And third, those who have yet to discern the call: that they may hear and heed God’s voice for the sake of the future of the Church.

+In the Name...