

Easter I (16 April 2023)

“He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.”

+In the Name...

There is a definite theme to today’s service. While “in the business” we refer to today as “Low Sunday,” you will notice that the term is not found in your Book of Common Prayer. Indeed, the term itself is a little obscure, probably not referring to what is often lower attendance than the preceding Sunday, but that the day itself ranks lower on the list of feasts than the Resurrection which we celebrated a mere week ago.

Let us revisit what we have read and heard thus far today, and see if we can make some sense of it. In the lesson from Morning Prayer of the prophet Isaiah, God reminds the people that He has formed them and redeemed them. In the Epistle, St. John speaks of those who have overcome the world through Christ, Who came by water and blood. Finally, Our risen Lord visits His disciples and gives to them the Holy Ghost. “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” While it may seem like a hodge-podge of theology, and in the latter case, something perhaps more appropriately

placed some 40 days ago during Lent, there is indeed a logic to what lections were chosen.

These lessons were chosen for their appropriateness for the newly baptized, those who had entered the Church after a lengthy process of learning their faith through the great fast of Lent. Now we look for ways to make entry into the Church as quick and simple as possible, perhaps in an effort to seem more welcoming and less off-putting. Of course, if one was being baptized, he was from outside the Church, not merely transferring his membership from the Presbyterian congregation down the street.

Look again: “I have formed thee,” God says to Isaiah and “I have redeemed thee.” In other words, you did not just wander into Christianity by mere luck or happenstance, but because God has chosen you to come into His Church. Baptism is the entry into that Church, which is given a central place at the Great Vigil of Easter. The new water for the font is blessed, and baptisms properly take place at that service. This morning’s Epistle makes special reference to both Our Lord’s baptism and His passion when describing that He came by the Spirit, water and the blood. But besides the sacrament of baptism, there is also the sacrament of confession, and the Gospel makes clear that the disciples, and by extension, their

successors, who are the bishops of the Church today, and the priests, whom the bishops delegate, have the authority to forgive sins.

It all seems rather overwhelming to someone brand new to the Church. In a previous sermon I have mentioned how masses during Lent and at special occasions were done at specific parish churches in Rome and elsewhere. Today's service was traditionally done at St. Pancras. No, not the Saint Pancras railway station in London. Holy Communion on the Eurostar, perhaps? Mind the gap! No, this is St. Pancras Basilica in Rome, named after the same saint as the famous railway station. Not widely known in this country, the details of his short life are not in abundant supply. What we do know is that he was a Roman citizen who had a short but hard life: his mother died in childbirth. His father died when Pancras was only eight. Entrusted to the care of an uncle, the pair moved to Rome where they both converted to Christianity. Pancras was a zealous defender of the faith, and because of that quality was given the martyr's crown during the persecutions of Diocletian in the early fourth century.

His name literally means "the one who holds everything", and that is what I want us to focus on right now. For those of us who have been Christians for a long time, indeed some of us no doubt probably cannot remember ever not being a

Christian. But if you can remember not being a Christian, think of when you first became convinced of the faith. Or think of something else that excited you: think of your confirmation; think of the first time you met your spouse; think of the first day of your favorite job. (Or maybe the last day of your least favorite job.) Try to keep it religious, if possible, as it will make my comparison easier to follow.

A new convert is a saint. He has been baptized, washed of all original sin. He has been to sacramental confession or received absolution during the mass, and so is washed of all other sin. He has received the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar for the first time. Indeed, he is one who holds everything. He is bursting with blessings. Would it not be great if we were all as excited about the faith today as we were when we first came to know and love God? Anglicanism does not put as much emphasis on a particular moment of salvation as do some other Christian groups, but even if you were raised in the Church, at some point you decided to follow Christ. You took ownership of that decision made for you at your baptism. If it was at baptism, you prayed for the power and strength to have victory and triumph against the devil, the world and the flesh. If it was at confirmation, you promised to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and to cultivate the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost: wisdom, understanding, counsel,

fortitude, knowledge, piety and awe or fear of the Lord. Or maybe it was just during a quiet moment in prayer between you and our Blessed Saviour, when you knew you had been called.

St. Pancras never had the opportunity to forget his initial zeal at becoming one of Christ's own. At only 14 years of age, Diocletian promised the boy wealth and power if he would make a sacrifice to the Roman gods. Pancras refused, and Diocletian ordered him to be decapitated. I do not usually make any points regarding relics in this parish, but as Anglicans, we have a special link to the relics of St. Pancras. St. Gregory sent relics of St. Pancras with Augustine when he travelled to England to reinvigorate the faith there. His cult spread though out the land, giving rise to many churches and other places, including the aforementioned railway station, being named in his honour.

I do not wish that any of us would ever have to make the decision forced on Pancras, but I pray that all of us would be strong enough in our faith to make the right decision. At Morning Prayer earlier this week, the first reading was from later in the book of Isaiah than what we heard this morning. God declared a new heaven and a new earth. It would not be business as usual, "There shall be no more thence an infant of days, nor an old man that hath not filled his days; for the child shall die

an hundred years old; but the sinner being an hundred years old shall be accursed. And they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them.”

Pancras could see the vision. He knew that his decisions would not save his body, but would surely save his soul. That is pretty incredible insight for a teen-ager. Maybe now we are too practical. I have heard it said, “The only causes worth fighting for are lost causes.” Perhaps during the reign of Diocletian, Christianity looked like a lost cause. How about today?

Yet I have no intention of ending on a negative tone. “They shall not labour in vain,” continues the Lord. “And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear.” See brethren, our side wins. That is, God wins, but we must work to make it happen. That is our job. It was the job of St. Pancras and all of God’s elect for the past 2,000 years.

And so I pray on this Low Sunday, 2023, that God will rekindle in our hearts that fire we first felt for Him. May we have all the zeal, the passion and the love that gave us new life when we first chose to follow Him, whenever it was. And may we have the courage to share that new life with all who need it.

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