

## Sunday Next Before Advent (26 November 2023)

“Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.”

+In the Name...

Have you started your Christmas pudding yet?! Yes, I know, grumpy Father Hart who usually spends Advent railing against listening to Christmas music or putting up decorations before the 24<sup>th</sup> of December is asking, with nearly a week of November left, if you have started your Christmas pudding! Isn't that why Abp. Thomas Cranmer, chief architect of the first Book of Common Prayer, wrote the collect nearly 500 years ago we heard at the beginning of this morning's mass? “Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord...”? Well, not exactly. (I had several “not exactly” moments this last week, but more on that shortly.)

Cranmer was translating the collect from the Latin which began with the word, “Excita”. You can see where we get the English word “excite” from this Latin word. “Excite us, Lord! Stir up our hearts and wills! You are coming to the earth. It doesn't get

any better than this!” Couple that with the fact that the traditional British Christmas pudding (read “dessert” here, not something that Jello peddles in a cardboard box in the baking aisle) needed to be started weeks before the actual feast day. The lore goes that the lady of the House, or the cook, or whoever made the pudding, would be reminded by this prayer that the feast was looming on the horizon and so the dessert needed to be started. Hence it being known as “stir up” Sunday.

I trust you will excuse me if I crow a little more than I should in this sermon about being a traditional Anglican. As you may remember from the sermon on the Feast of Christ the King, the Roman Catholic world and much of the Anglican world celebrate the Feast of Christ the King today. We celebrated it a month ago (following an older tradition), leaving Stir-up Sunday where it belongs, thank you very much.

This particular year in the Church Kalendar is unusual because this Sunday falls *after* Thanksgiving, rather than the

Sunday before, as is the norm. It gives us an interesting mix of things: we are done with Thanksgiving (at least the holiday even if not the leftovers) before we have to worry about making our Christmas pudding, as alluded to in the Collect. Our Epistle chosen for this morning is not an epistle at all, but from the prophet Jeremiah. Its Advent theme is vivid: the raising of a king from the House of David, and the return of the Jews to their own land.

The inclusion of this Gospel for today is a little more higgledy-piggledy. (Am I allowed to say that about Holy Scripture?) I am not at all referring to the very-familiar story to us of the multiplying of the loaves and fishes, only its inclusion on this particular Sunday. Liturgical scholars are not in agreement: some suggest it is because it makes reference to St. Andrew, whose feast we will celebrate on Thursday. Others have looked more closely at the choice of words themselves, suggesting that the “lost fragments” could refer to the gentiles, or the final verse

saying “that prophet should come into the world”. (Notice, not “a prophet” but “that prophet”; “*the* prophet”.) Because there is a diversity of opinion, I could posit my own: what could be more appropriate for so near the national holiday where we celebrate gorging ourselves than to hear about multiplying food so that all would have enough? (Yes, I realize the Book of Common Prayer predates Plymouth Rock, but I am on a roll here!)

Let’s look at our Pilgrim forbears while we have this opportunity: A day before Thanksgiving I read a letter from a Roman Catholic publisher to his customers. Having purchased books from his company in the past, I was included in his intimate list of likely everyone who has ever purchased so much as a crucifix-shaped sticky note from him. He enjoined his fellow members of the Roman Church to give thanks to God for all His blessings despite the anti-Catholic background of the holiday... I had to think about that one for a minute; it was my first “not exactly” moment this Thanksgiving season. I assume he means

the Pilgrims when he says “anti-Catholic”. Indeed, the Pilgrims were decidedly not members of the Roman Catholic Church, although they left England because of the Church of England, not because of the Roman Church. The holiday of Thanksgiving, however, was made a national holiday by Abraham Lincoln. Not that it had not been celebrated before then, but Lincoln stated in his proclamation, “No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Highest God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy”. And Lincoln was not known for his devotion. He never joined a church, but frequently attended a Presbyterian congregation with his wife, especially after two of his sons died, and the American Civil War dragged on longer than expected. Lincoln did not fit in with the Evangelicals of his day, but he knew the importance of giving thanks to “Divine Providence”, as he frequently spoke of it. This was not a mere “harvest festival” as had been celebrated

throughout the world for millennia, but an opportunity to give thanks to Almighty God for His countless blessings. Hardly anti-Catholic; not even exclusively Christian.

My second “Not exactly” moment came on Thursday as I was listening to a sermon. The preacher said that he used to like the Pilgrims until he found out that they were so “mean”. My son asked what I thought he meant by that, but of course, there was no question-and-answer period. One could speculate that he was referring to how the United States in general would come to treat the Native American Indians. Or perhaps the lack of religious tolerance that would become the hallmark of New England prior to the American Constitution. But here we run the risk, as is so common in our post-modern society, of painting every member of a group in history with a very broad brush. I have no doubt there were “mean” Pilgrims. I bet there have been “mean” Roman Catholics. There might even have been a “mean” Anglican at some point in the history of Christendom! {Perish the thought!}

And this brings me back to my “I am thankful I am an Anglican” mantra: the Roman Church holds us too close to the Pilgrims because they broke directly off the Church of England. Put the Pilgrims left the C of E because Anglicans were too much like the Romans Church! Indeed, the idea of stirring up Christmas pudding would not have appealed to the Pilgrims, {as they would not have celebrated Christmas} not to mention the vestments, candles, incense, liturgy, music and artwork that are part and parcel of the Parish of St. Mark. The ingenuity of Anglicanism has also been a weakness: by trying to include everyone we ended up with a small slice of the middle!

Some would say that I should not preach a sermon like this, or at least not include how wonderful I think Anglicanism is. They would suggest it could lead to the faithful sitting smugly, basking in how wonderful we are. But that is contrary to this morning’s Gospel. We cannot just sit on our laurels smugly. Either we need to feed everyone, or we need to convert everyone, depending on

how you interpret Our Lord's directive not to let any fragments be lost. (Spoiler alert: it is likely both!)

So I ask you this Advent to think about how you might follow Our Lord's instructions: Feed someone and convert someone!

Okay, the first will be much easier: Lift Urban Portland has provided the Reverse Advent Calendar for you, which has been conveniently printed in the *Mane Lion*. Please remember those items as you do your own shopping. I want to have to deliver that food every other day! Now the harder part: you cannot make someone convert, but invite someone to mass for Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Friend, family, foreigner, it doesn't matter. As Michael says in the Christmas movie Beyond Tomorrow, "There are no strangers on Christmas Eve." I may be biased, but I think we are the best church in town. But we have to do our part to make sure that none of God's fragments are lost.

+In the Name...