

Lent IV (10 March 2024)

“So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would.”

+In the Name of...

When I was in seminary, one of the local parishes (which shall remain nameless to protect the guilty) had a set of rose vestments that must have nearly glowed in the dark. They were not quite neon pink, but if you picked the shade from a book of fabrics or at the paint store, surely it would have qualified as “bubblegum pink” or something that sounded equally non-liturgical! In many parishes, there is not a little bit of snickering as the priest goes by in a color that is otherwise nearly unknown in the Christian liturgical world.

But here we are in the long season of Lent at another Rose Sunday, one of two during the Christian year. The idea is to give

the faithful a reprieve from the fasting and sacrificial practices they have been performing since Ash Wednesday. There are several liturgical cues that this is not an ordinary Lenten Sunday. I have already mentioned the color of the vestments, but it was chosen as a less severe version of the violet that is the norm. (A priest friend of mine has pointed out that lilac is not a liturgical color” referring to that which is used during Lent at St. Mark’s, still visible on the altar frontal.) In addition, the opening line of the Introit, spoken by the priest at Low Mass or chanted by the cantor at High Mass, but either way the very first words one hears uttered at Holy Mass today is, “Rejoice!” (In some places today is known as “Laetare Sunday”, the first word used in the Introit at a Latin mass.)

But whom are we calling on to rejoice? Or maybe the questions should be why? Possibly both: The Introit, quoting from the prophet Isaiah, is telling the listener to rejoice with Jerusalem. Salvation is imminent! I have made mention as to how in Lent

there is a specific mass for each and every day, in addition to the saints whose feasts occur during the season. Throughout most of the year if there is not the feast day of a saint, the Propers, that is, the Collect, epistle and Gospel from the Sunday before are repeated. The Church calls this a “feria”. (It comes from the Latin for “day of rest” which does not seem particularly appropriate in this instance. Rest from the regular practice of celebrating a saint perhaps.) But in Lent, there are no “ferias” in the proper sense. On weekdays the Propers of the Mass are that of the Wednesday after the Third Sunday of Lent, or whatever day it is. In addition, the Bishop of Rome celebrated Mass each day in a different church. Today’s Mass would have been celebrated at the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem. Hence, many references to Jerusalem in the minor Propers but also in the epistle too: while the comparison of Hagar and Sarah, or rather their sons, is most often used to illustrate the difference between the Jews, who are bound by the law, and the Church which is freed from it by the mercy

and grace of Christ: apart from Him there is only bondage to sin, but in Christ there is true liberty and freedom. Remember, there were those teaching at this time that a convert had to become a Jew, that is, follow the Law, before one could become a Christian. But keeping with our earlier theme of Jerusalem, there are those Scripture scholars who believe that this epistle is an allegory for the two Jerusalems: the earthly and the Heavenly. The earthly one is represented by the city itself, as the heart of Judaism, bound to the law and persecuting the early Church. The heavenly Jerusalem is representative of the Church, free from the yoke of the Law, being born “after the Spirit”. Of course, this still leaves the hearer with comparing Judaism and Christianity, but it puts it in the context of what awaits the believer on the other side of death. Which is no small matter in the beliefs of Christianity.

It is no accident that this Gospel lesson is chosen for today either. At first blush it does not sound very Lenten, but that is the point. During Lent we fast and pray: by denying ourselves

physical pleasures, we should find it easier to deny ourselves whatever sins happen to tempt us. This Sunday of rejoicing has a Gospel lesson that does not speak to sacrifice or denying oneself, but of a miracle where one small lunch was multiplied so that 5,000 were fed not just a morsel, but until they were full and then when the leftovers were collected there was more than what they started with. Don't we wish we could manage that for our potlucks, or better yet, for our food collection barrels? After Mass at the Holy Cross Basilica in Jerusalem, the Bishop of Rome would hand out bread to the poor, in honor of the Gospel.

Continuing the bread theme, in parts of England it is customary to take bread, especially a Simnel cake, to one's mother in honor of it being called "Mothering Sunday". Originally it was called by this name in the Middle Ages because Jerusalem is the Mother of us all. Later it became a day when the faithful were encouraged to visit their "Mother Church" that is, where they were baptized.

We all know the story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, so I shall not dwell on it for too long this morning. I suspect it was the first Bible story I ever learned, well, maybe after Noah's Ark. (The copy of the children's book I am thinking of I cannot remember not having.) Indeed, it is the only one of Our Lord's miracles to appear in all four Gospels.

But in a few minutes, we will have our own miracle involving bread right here in this church. God is going to change the simplest of breads, consisting of nothing but baked flour and water, into the Body of Jesus Christ! No gimmicks, no sleight of hand, and no reservations required. If what we believe is going on at that altar really is going on there, what will you do this week that is more important than assisting at Holy Mass? Give thanks to Almighty God that you have the privilege of witnessing this miracle – really, for being a part of it - week after week. You don't have to travel on foot to the middle of nowhere and you don't have to travel with 5,000 of your closest friends! You just have to

approach with a believing and penitent heart. Wearing pink is optional.

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