

Laetare - the Fourth Sunday in Lent

Hymns: 155, 144, 158, 148

(omit Gloria, responses before & after the Gospel reading, and other ascriptions of praise during Lent.)

The INTROIT

(Ps. 66:10; 122:1)

P: Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her:

C: all ye that love her.

P: Rejoice for joy with her:

C: all ye that mourn for her.

P: I was glad when they said unto me:

C: Let us go into the house of the LORD.

(The "Gloria in Excelsis" is omitted during the Penitential Season of Lent)

The COLLECT

Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of Thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.

The FIRST LESSON

Isaiah 49:8-13

Thus saith the LORD, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them. And I will make all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be exalted. Behold, these shall come from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim. Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted.

THE GRADUAL

(Psalm 143:9-10; 18:48; 129:1-2)

P: Deliver me, O Lord, from mine enemies; teach me to do Thy will.

C: He delivereth me from mine enemies; yea, Thou liftest me up above those that rise up against me; Thou hast delivered me from the violent man.

P: Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth.

C: May Israel now say; many a time have they afflicted me from my youth. Yet they have not prevailed against me.

Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written,

Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not;
break forth and cry, thou that travailest not:
for the desolate hath many more children
than she which hath an husband.

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.

The SENTENCE for the Season

(Philippians 2:8)

P: Christ has humbled himself, and become obedient unto death:

C: even the death of the cross.

The HOLY GOSPEL

St. John 6:1-15

After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased. And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his disciples. And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh.

When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do.

Philip answered him, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little.

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him, There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?

And Jesus said, Make the men sit down. Now there was much grass in the place. 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.

When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. Therefore they gathered them together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which remained over and above unto them that had eaten. Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.

When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.

John 6:1-15 — “To Make Him a King”

INTRODUCTION

I. AND THE PASSOVER, A FEAST OF THE JEWS, WAS NIGH

II. NOW THERE WAS MUCH GRASS IN THE PLACE

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John 6:1-15 — “To Make Him a King”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you all from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The appointed Gospel reading is John 6:1-15:

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When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

In studying this text I was reminded of the words that St. John wrote at the end of Chapter Twenty. **“And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.”** He repeats this thought at the end of Chapter Twenty-one: **“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.”** Truly, even in this one event from the ministry of the Lord Jesus there is a summary of the faith and life of faith and enough to study for a lifetime.

I. AND THE PASSOVER, A FEAST OF THE JEWS, WAS NIGH

St. John tells a great deal in the opening paragraph of this accounting. He makes mention of what at first may seem to be a point of insignificance. He says that at the time of this event that the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh. How close John does not say, but the time of the Passover was close. But for the time being, Jesus takes His disciples in the opposite direction of Jerusalem, where the Passover would be celebrated. He takes them across the Sea of Galilee and up a mountain to teach them. But they are not alone, for a great multitude followed Him, a multitude of about five thousand men, plus women and children.

John tells us the reason that these people followed Jesus. Their reason was **“because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased.”** This word for diseased literally means *without vigor*. Sickness is the opposite of bodily vigor. The sick are weakened and distressed. We often use the word *diseased*, which means that we are not at ease, not at rest. Truly, we are not at ease when we feel the weakness of our bodies, the weakness that accompanies the excommunication that sin causes. When we are cut off from the Lord of Life by sin, truly we are dis-eased and without vigor. Sin robs us of our comfort. Sin leads us into anxiety and worry and fear and doubt and stressfulness. Sin robs us of the knowledge of good by mingling evil with our thoughts, words, and deeds so that even our best thoughts and our most carefully chosen words and our most diligent attempts at goodness all fall short and leave us dis-eased.

John records for us that the congregation that followed Jesus was not really drawn to Jesus as the LORD and the true King from heaven. Rather, they were drawn to their own vision of what they wanted. They were drawn to the miracles that he worked on the dis-eased. They did not congregate with the desire to be restored to the Holy Communion of the Lord Jesus. They congregated to see what they could get from Jesus for their earthly lives. They came to see what miracles He could work for them for the here and now. They wanted to persuade Jesus to make their temporal lives more at ease.

In contrast, St. John adds that the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh. Why does John set up this contrast? Contrary to the notions of many commentators, John was not merely giving a reference to time and the season of the Church Year. No, not with the clear statement that is made in verses 53-57 of this same chapter:

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.

This is what the true Church is, the congregating to eat and drink the flesh and blood of Jesus so as to dwell in Him. The Holy Spirit is teaching us the true meaning of the Church in this statement. The Holy Spirit is teaching what it really means to follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit is teaching us what it is that the ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ really is. It is not a gathering to Jesus to make us more at ease in this world. It is a gathering unto Jesus to be made one in Him to partake of His body and blood so that our life may be in Him in His Holy Communion. It is the pronouncement that the Passover is nigh. The true Church follows Jesus as His true body to

partake of His flesh and blood so that His life dwells in us as we dwell in Him. Then we see the true miracle for which Jesus has come into the world. Then we see all things made new and our hearts and minds are made to be fixed on the things above rather than the things of the earth. Then our dis-eases are no longer empowered to rule over us. Then we count our current sufferings as nothing compared to the glory that we will inherit as coheirs of Christ.

II. NOW THERE WAS MUCH GRASS IN THE PLACE

After setting up this very powerful contrast of world views and of understandings of following Jesus, then John gives us more details.

When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do.

This is truly amazing. Here the Lord Jesus prepares for us to learn the true life that belongs to the saints. He presents to Philip the answer to the question that Philip will ask a year later when Jesus institutes the New Testament in His blood and Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father so that they may be satisfied. To receive Jesus is to receive the Father, in the flesh. To eat and drink what Jesus gives us to eat and to drink is to eat and to drink from the hand of the Father in the flesh. God is spirit, but in the person of Jesus, God comes to us and gives Himself to us in flesh and blood. The multitude did not realize who Jesus is. The disciples did not truly realize who Jesus is. Yet by faith they received what they did not understand.

Now this test was given by Jesus at the beginning of the gathering. When Jesus looked up and saw the multitude congregating, He asked Philip according to the ways of worldly minded men, **“Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?”** The apostles had all day to figure out the answer. Philip’s answer reflected the hopelessness of trying to provide for the Church according to mammon and money. The needs of the saints cannot be provided for by means of money. Andrew comes forward with what could be found from the congregation and rightly declared the hopelessness of trying to ask the congregation to provide for the needs of the saints. After all of their thinking on the matter, after all of their searching for answers to the needs of the Church, after all of their searching among the congregation for the means to feed and provide for the people, they had to turn to Jesus. This is the answer to the test.

Jesus commanded that the disciples command the men to sit down. When the head of the house sits to eat, his wife and children also sit to eat. Thus, Jesus commanded that the men be seated to eat. John tells us that there was much grass in that place and the men sat down to eat. Perhaps the link to Psalm Twenty-three does not immediately come to your mind, but it clearly is here.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

And Jesus said, Make the men sit down. Now there was much grass in the place. 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.

This is the way of the Church. Jesus takes from what He has given us in our lives, bread and wine, and He feeds us His body and blood that we may have life in Him. He baptizes us into His kingdom with common water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word. Then, having brought us into His Holy Communion, He commands us to sit down, that is, to do nothing but rest, while He feeds us and provides us with all that we need for our life in Him.

Oh that those claiming to be representing the LORD would learn what the Lord Jesus teaches in this example! Jesus takes the ordinary things of this world, binds Himself to them by His ordinance, blessing them and empowering them by His words of institution, entrusting them to His called servants to administer to the saints who have congregated unto Him in the body of His Holy Communion. When this is the way of the Church, God's grace is poured out in overabundance so that all are satisfied and filled up with His grace overflowing.

III. TO MAKE HIM A KING

Yet the people never learn.

Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.

When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.

This is the way when people get what they want from God. This is the way that sinful hearts perceive God's goodness. God makes His sun to shine and His rain to fall and everyone benefits. God commands that we pray so that we learn to receive these blessings with thanksgiving, and sinners imagine that God blesses them because they pray. As if anything that we say could have the power to influence God's will! No! God commands us to pray so that we see His good and gracious will at work in our lives!

But according to our own reason and strength, we cannot perceive the kingdom of God nor enter into it. The Holy Spirit must regenerate us by means of water and thereby make true believers of us and bring us into God's kingdom of the true Church. But instead, even with such clear statements as in John 3 and in Titus 3 and in Matthew 28 and in Acts 2:38-39 and in 1 Peter 3:21, still men try to come and take Jesus by force to make Him a king.

Jesus already is a king, and more than A king: He is THE KING. Jesus is the King of Glory who humbles Himself to come to us gently through His means of grace so that we may receive Him as our loving and gracious King who rules not by the Law but by the Gospel. He comes to us. He calls us to gather into His name and where such a congregation follows His voice, He comes to us.

Yet men still will not hear of such a Jesus. They insist that we must decide to follow Jesus. They teach that we must give our lives to Jesus and commit ourselves to Jesus. They turn Baptism into a symbolic act of our obedience rather than God's holy instrument of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and of grace. They turn the meal of forgiveness and life into another mere symbolic act of obedience by which one demonstrates the commitment of one's faith rather than God's holy supper by which He feeds us the very body and blood by which our lives have been redeemed by Jesus. They teach that we must make Jesus the king of our hearts by inviting Him into our hearts to be our Lord and Savior rather than acknowledging that Jesus has already purchased us with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. When we seek to make Jesus our King, when we seek to make Jesus the Lord of our lives, we turn to a Jesus of our own making and we drive the real Jesus far away from us. Jesus cannot rule in a heart that already has another Jesus set up as king. Jesus rules by the means of grace that He instituted. When this is our understanding, it is because the peace of God rules our hearts and minds and keeps us in Christ Jesus. This is the peace that surpasses all understanding. This is the peace that far surpasses our own reason and strength. This is the peace of God that comes by the working of the Holy Spirit. This is the peace that surpasses striving to be a believer and sets us free simply to live by faith and to walk in spirit.

Jesus IS the King, even as He is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. We cannot make Jesus a king, not even in our own hearts. But the Holy Ghost has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, and sanctified and kept us with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. This magnanimous work of the Holy Spirit never ends. He works this for us day in and day out, moment by moment. Because the Holy Spirit is the one who works faith in us, Jesus truly does rule in our hearts by faith and not by our own choosing or deciding. Jesus gives His life to us so that the life that we live is in Him. Then, rather than seeking to give our lives to Jesus, we daily look to Him as our life and we find that His grace truly is sufficient for us. This is what our gracious Lord and King teaches in the feeding of the five thousand when the Passover is nigh.

CONCLUSION

Truly this is a text full of God's grace. Truly the LORD's Passover is nigh. It is set before us this very day and He stands waiting to feed us and to satisfy our hungry souls. Our King is here with us as our gentle Shepherd who commands us to sit down at the table that He has prepared before us. There is nothing left for us to do, for He has done it all. He has gathered us by the delightful call of His Gospel. He has baptized us into His Kingdom with the gift of the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. Now it is time for us to eat and to be filled and to sit in the joy of His rest and to give thanks. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.