

Laetare – The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Collect:

Oremus. 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.

Liturgical Setting:

This Sunday derives its name from the introit (Rejoice!). It is popularly called “Rejoicing Sunday” because of the occurrence of this word in the Epistle as well as the Introit; or “Refreshment Sunday” in allusion to the miracle recorded in the Gospel; or merely “Mid-Lent.” Anciently the “station” for this day was the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem in the city of Rome – and note that the Introit, Epistle, and Gradual all have reference to Jerusalem. The propers seem definitely to have been chosen to relieve the austerities of the Lenten season. Anciently the pope distributed bread to the poor on this day. Later, rose-colored vestments were worn and (16th century) a golden rose, symbolic of our Lord, the Rose of Sharon, was solemnly blessed by the pope and sent as a gift to some king, queen, or other high dignitary in recognition of service rendered the church. Recall that Frederick received this rose as a bribe to turn over Luther! Also anciently, the catechumens were advanced a step on this day, and permitted to remain a bit longer with the faithful in order to hear the Gospel read and explained. On this day they were also taught the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. The rejoicing of the catechumens is what is reflected in the Gradual: I was glad when they said unto me: Let us go into the house of the Lord! (Reed)

The Gospel reading announces that “the Passover was nigh.” The Church took this to mean that Easter was approaching rapidly and the church’s joy at the Great Passover’s approach breaks out even in the midst of Lent. “Easter is not far away!” is the thought that influences and dominates the Liturgy of this day. The previous Sundays’ Introits have been cries from the depths, but this Sunday the service begins with “Rejoice!” The collect speaks of “the comfort of Thy grace.” The Epistle emphasizes the true freedom of those “born according to the Spirit.” The Gradual repeats the note of joy: “I was glad.” The Holy Gospel tells of the refreshment that the bounteous Christ provides His hungry people. (Lindemann)

Readings:

Old Testament: Isaiah 49:8-13 - “In a day of salvation I have helped you!” And the help provided is the gift of the Servant of Yahweh to His people to be “a covenant to the people” to say to the prisoners “come out!” and to feed them even in the desert wastes so that they shall not hunger or thirst anymore.

Epistle: Galatians 4:21-31 – The allegory of Hagar – sign of Sinai – mother of the children in slavery, corresponding “to the Jerusalem that now is.” In contrast there is Sarah – sign of the covenant of promise with Abraham – mother of the free children, corresponding to “Jerusalem which is above is free, the mother of us all.” Note that she is called “barren” – i.e., she has conceived in no natural way. And yet she has a multitude of children. Her promise-born children are persecuted by the children of the law, even as Ishmael mocked (sporting with) Isaac. Yet in the end, the children of the slave woman are cast out and the children of freedom abide as the heirs, just as Ishmael and Hagar are driven away from Abraham’s tents and only Isaac and Sarah remained.

Gradual: I was glad when they said unto me: Let us go into the house of the Lord. Peace be within thy walls: and prosperity within thy palaces. They that trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion: who cannot be removed, but abideth forever. As the mountains are round about Jerusalem: so the Lord is round about His people from henceforth even forever!

Holy Gospel: John 6:1-15 - Feeding of the 5,000 +. The importance of this miracle is attested by the fact that save for the miracle of our Lord's resurrection, it is the only miracle performed by our Lord to which all four Gospels bear testimony. It was also frequently portrayed in the catacombs.

1 After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. 2 And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased. 3 And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his disciples.

Μετὰ ταῦτα ἀπῆλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς πέραν τῆς θαλάσσης τῆς Γαλιλαίας τῆς Τιβεριάδος. 2 ἠκολούθει δὲ αὐτῷ ὄχλος πολὺς, ὅτι ἐθεώρουν τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐποίει ἐπὶ τῶν ἀσθενούντων. 3 ἀνῆλθεν δὲ εἰς τὸ ὄρος Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἐκεῖ ἐκάθητο μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ.

They came not for the teaching, but to see the miracles, and yet he welcomed them. What brings a person to Jesus? What leads them to “hang around” where He is? In the end, what matters is not much what brings you to Him, but that having been encountered Him, you never let Him go. This you can bet on: whatever brings you to Him in the first place is not nearly so big as what He wants to give you. Chrysostom notes that John is rather miserly in doling out info on the miracles compared to the other Gospels. The reason he says is that John is far more interested in our Lord's discourses, His teachings, and the miracles always serve those. We might note in passing the mountain where Jesus sits to teach. Not unlike Matthew 5. Echoes of OT mountains and teachers...

4 And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh. 5 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? 6 And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do.

4 ἦν δὲ ἐγγὺς τὸ πάσχα, ἡ ἑορτὴ τῶν Ἰουδαίων. 5 Ἐπάρας οὖν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ θεασάμενος ὅτι πολὺς ὄχλος ἔρχεται πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγει πρὸς Φίλιππον· πόθεν ἀγοράσωμεν ἄρτους ἵνα φάγωσιν οὗτοι; 6 τοῦτο δὲ ἔλεγεν πειράζων αὐτόν· αὐτὸς γὰρ ᾔδει τί ἔμελλεν ποιεῖν.

The Passover was nigh. That calls to mind the wilderness wandering of the children and the miraculous provision of bread. Jesus checks with Philip to see if he's put it together yet. Does Philip realize that sitting there in front of him is the One who fed the children as they wandered 40 years in the wilderness with the bread of heaven, angel's food? Whence shall we buy bread? The Lord asks. Isaiah 55 should have come ringing in: “Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and ye that have no money, come buy and eat... Why do you spend money for what is not bread and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen to me and your soul shall live!”

When the Lord tosses a problem in your lap, He does not do this for you to show off your ingenuity in solving it. It's rather, how long will it take before you realize that the problem needs to be tossed back to Him? That's faith at work. “Your problem, Lord. Let me know what you want me to do.” Philip isn't there yet. Neither are we, most days.

7 Philip answered him, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little. 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him, 9 There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?

7 ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ [ὁ] Φίλιππος· διακοσίων δηναρίων ἄρτοι οὐκ ἀρκοῦσιν αὐτοῖς ἵνα ἕκαστος βραχύ [τι] λάβῃ. 8 λέγει αὐτῷ εἰς ἓκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ, Ἀνδρέας ὁ ἀδελφὸς Σίμωνος Πέτρου· 9 ἔστιν παιδάριον ᾧδε ὃς ἔχει πέντε ἄρτους κριθίνους καὶ δύο ὀψάρια· ἀλλὰ ταῦτα τί ἔστιν εἰς τοσοῦτους;

Philip is staring open-mouthed and dismayed at the vastness of the problem. Andrew's eyes are drawn down to the littleness of the resources they have to meet the problem. What they both singularly fail at is

fixing their eyes where their eyes belong. “Come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus!” cries the writer to the Hebrews. Eyes fixed on Jesus are eyes that will not be dazzled by the oversized need nor dismayed by the undersized resources. Eyes fixed on Jesus are eyes that know that the God-Man who could keep His people going for 40 years in the wilderness will have no problem keeping us going during our years of pilgrimage. But they weren’t there yet, neither Philip nor Andrew. Nor are we, most days.

“But in order that the creation might not seem foreign to His Wisdom, as afterwards slanderers and those affected with the disease of Marcion said, He used the creation itself as a groundwork for His marvels.” (Chrysostom) Thus, He doesn’t create the solution to their problem ex nihilo, but uses the good creation He has already made to meet the need.

10 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. 11 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. 12 When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. 13 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.

10 εἶπεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ποιήσατε τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἀναπεσεῖν. ἦν δὲ χόρτος πολὺς ἐν τῷ τόπῳ. ἀνέπεσαν οὖν οἱ ἄνδρες τὸν ἀριθμὸν ὡς πεντακισχίλιοι. 11 ἔλαβεν οὖν τοὺς ἄρτους ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ εὐχαριστήσας διέδωκεν τοῖς ἀνακειμένοις ὁμοίως καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὀψαρίων ὅσον ἤθελον. 12 ὡς δὲ ἐνεπλήσθησαν, λέγει τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ· συναγάγετε τὰ περισσεύσαντα κλάσματα, ἵνα μὴ τι ἀπόληται. 13 συνήγαγον οὖν καὶ ἐγέμισαν δώδεκα κοφίνους κλασμάτων ἐκ τῶν πέντε ἄρτων τῶν κριθίνων ἃ ἐπερίσσευσαν τοῖς βεβρωκόσιν.

Why does our Lord pray over the loaves instead of just multiplying them by His divine power? “It was to show that when we begin our meals, we ought to give thanks unto God.” (Chrysostom)

Notice that Jesus gave thanks over the loaves and gave them into the hands of the 12 and sent them out to distribute them. Were they grudging at first in the distribution? Afraid that it would run out too fast and Jesus’ appear to have been a lunatic sending them out to feed so many with so little? When did the astonishing fact dawn that no matter how much they gave away, the bread in their hand remained the same? And then did they start dishing it out with laughter and joy? “Here, old man, have some more!” But if they grow careless in their giddiness, the Lord remains prudent and orders the left-overs gathered. The each end up with a basketful. A not very subtle way of confessing that if you want the bread that Jesus has blessed and multiplied, you’ll find it in the hands of the 12 He has chosen and appointed to be His apostles. They are the men who distribute the bread to you, and what they have been dishing out has been feeding more than 5,000, but the whole world for these centuries upon centuries! Thus: “But why gave He not the bread to the multitudes to bear, but (only) to His disciples? Because He was most desirous to instruct these who were to be the teachers of the world.” (Chrysostom)

14 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. 15 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.

14 Οἱ οὖν ἄνθρωποι ἰδόντες ὃ ἐποίησεν σημεῖον ἔλεγον ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ἀληθῶς ὁ προφήτης ὁ ἐρχόμενος εἰς τὸν κόσμον. 15 Ἰησοῦς οὖν γινὼς ὅτι μέλλουσιν ἐρχεσθαι καὶ ἀρπάξειν αὐτὸν ἵνα ποιήσωσιν βασιλέα, ἀνεχώρησεν πάλιν εἰς τὸ ὄρος αὐτὸς μόνος.

What a zinger Chrysostom gives at the end: Wonderful! How great is the tyranny of gluttony, how great the fickleness of men's minds! No longer do they vindicate the Law, no longer do they care for the violation of the Sabbath, no longer are they zealous for God; all such considerations are thrown aside, when their bellies have been filled; He was a prophet in their eyes, and they were about to choose Him for a king. But Christ fleeth. "Wherefore?" To teach us to despise worldly dignities, and to show us that He needed nothing on earth. For He who chose all things mean, both mother and house and city and nurture and attire would not afterwards be made illustrious by things on earth. The things which (He had) from heaven were glorious and great, angels, a star, His Father loudly speaking, the Spirit testifying, and Prophets proclaiming Him from afar; those on earth were all mean, that thus His power might the more

appear. He came also to teach us to despise the things of the world, and not be amazed or astonished by the splendors of this life, but to laugh them all to scorn, and to desire those which are to come. For he who admires things which are here, will not admire those in the heavens. Wherefore also He saith to Pilate, "My Kingdom is not of this world" (c. xviii. 36), that He may not afterwards appear to have employed mere human terror or dominion for the purpose of persuasion. Why then saith the Prophet, "Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass"? (Zech. ix. 9.) He spake of that Kingdom which is in the heavens, but not of this on earth; and on this account Christ saith, "I receive not honor from men." (c. v. 41.) (Chrysostom)

And even more: "Nay, it very greatly injures us by making us slaves, slaves in worse condition than those bought with money, slaves who obey not one master only, but two, three, ten thousand, all giving different commands. How much better is it to be a free man than a slave, to be free from the slavery of men, and subject only to the dominion of God? In a word, if thou wilt desire glory, desire it, but let it be the glory immortal, for that is exhibited on a more glorious stage, and brings greater profit. For the men here bid thee be at charges to please them, but Christ, on the contrary, giveth thee an hundredfold for what thou givest Him, and addeth moreover eternal life. Which of the two then is better, to be admired on earth, or in heaven? by man, or by God? to your loss, or to your gain? to wear a crown for a single day, or for endless ages? (Chrysostom)

Is not this precisely what our Christmas hymn glories in? "For velvets soft and silken stuff, Thou hast but hay and straw so rough, whereon Thou King, so rich and great, as twere Thy heaven wert Thou in state / And thus, dear Lord, it pleaseth Thee to make this truth quite plain to me, that all the world's wealth, honor, might, are naught and worthless in Thy sight."

Homiletics:

Central Thought: This Sunday in Lent, the Church instructs the newbies that there is no trial that will confronts them as Christians that does not find its answer by looking to Jesus and receiving from the hands of His apostolic ministers the bread that He has given them to give away "for the life of the world."

Goal: "Come, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith!"

Malady: Forgetting the Lord Jesus. Not tossing the trial back to Him. Eyes mesmerized by the vastness of the challenge. Hearts discouraged by the meagerness of the resources. Eyes not (like Oculi's Introit) "ever on the Lord!"

SLOG: Bread provided in the wilderness? We all know where John 6 ends (well, all except a few hard-headed Lutherans!) EUCHARIST!

BVM: She is the oven in which the bread of life was baked and first served up to the world!

Weedon
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