

Mothering Sunday

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my Lord and my redeemer. Amen

In the Bible and in Christian tradition, numbers are often full of symbolical significance, and such is the case with the forty days of Lent. These forty days, of course, recall the forty days of Jesus' fasting and temptation in the wilderness. But they recall, as well, those forty years of Exodus, the forty years of Israel's journey from captivity in Egypt, the struggle through the wilderness to the promised land of freedom, led by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night, sustained by manna from the skies, and water from the stony rock.

Behind all this rich and complex symbolism, there are ideas which are both simple and altogether basic for our spiritual life as Christians. There is, first of all, a diagnosis of our condition as alienation, exile, bondage, and captivity in a foreign land.

Spiritually, it means our alienation from God, our separation from

our spirit's home, and our wandering through a barren wilderness, a place of trials and temptations, striving to return. Then, there is the journey's destination, the promised land, the city of Jerusalem, the house of God, the place of peace and reconciliation. Spiritually that means the spirit's home, the true and perfect and eternal good, for which our spirits yearn. "Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God. When shall I come to appear before the presence of God?" [Psalm 42]. Thirdly, there is the idea of divine sustenance and guidance through the journey. Spiritually, that means the Providence of God, the watchful care and nutriment of our poor spirits by the truth of God, in word and sacrament. "Behold, angels came and ministered unto him."

Alienation, and home-coming, under the providence of God: that is the story of Israel: forty years of Exodus from Egypt, and forty years of captivity in Babylon. Symbolically, it is the story of the struggle of the human soul, as it makes its homeward way to God.

It is the symbol, the shadow; the substance of which is Christ's journey through death and resurrection, in which we follow him.

Lent represents to us this pilgrimage, the inner journey of the soul, struggling in the wilderness of trials and temptations, seeking a spiritual Jerusalem, the homeland of the spirit. This wilderness, you see, is not some external place, or some external circumstances; it is nothing but the soul's confused, unfruitful life before it finds its meeting-place in God. With the passing of the centuries, of course, the images do change. For William Blake, for instance, writing his poem on Jerusalem, the place of alienation is not the wilderness, but the “dark, satanic mills” of industrial-revolution England. The journey is symbolized by the “sword of mental strife” and the “arrows of desire”; and the symbol of the life of the spirit is not the city, but the “green and pleasant land”.

Nowadays, I suppose we are inclined to think of the wilderness as the place of peace and recreation, and of the city as the place of

dark and unknown perils. The images do change, but the basic thought remains the same. The journey is the inner journey of the soul, the soul's own transformation, as it finds renewal of the mind in God, through the providence of God's own revelation. That is the basic theme of Lent—the journey to Jerusalem—and it is in that context that we should think about our scripture lessons for the Sundays of this season.

The lessons for the past three Sundays have all been about trials and temptations, about Jesus' fasting and temptations in the wilderness, and the rebuking and casting out of devils. Those demons are in some sense fantasies, and yet, they are certainly some sort of spiritual realities, not easily dismissed. They are the false passions and attachments and ideals which certainly exist, and enter in, and powerfully possess our souls. That is to say, they are the false gods we so readily entertain, and foolishly set our hearts upon, and thus separate ourselves from the true and living

God. That is our bondage and captivity—that is Babylon and Egypt, the foreign land of exile.

Those demons, those false gods are not impregnable, and their pretensions can be shattered. Often enough, they reveal their feet of clay, and we become disillusioned with them, and cast out one or two of them. But as last Sunday's Gospel taught us [St. Luke 11.14-28], the casting out of demons is not enough—the empty, disillusioned soul is vulnerable to more, and yet more vicious, demons. “When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest: and finding none, he saith, I will return to my house whence I came out; and when he cometh, he findeth it swept and garnished: then goeth he and taketh to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there, and the last state of that man is worse than the first.” The vacant soul is vulnerable to new and stronger frauds and fallacies, and the number waiting to enter in, and make us captive once again, is legion.

The empty soul, the swept and garnished house, is not enough; in fact, it is an altogether perilous situation. And thus, today's lessons speak to us of spiritual nutriment, the filling of our souls with the truth and grace of God. The Gospel lesson is the story of the multitude in the wilderness, miraculously fed by Christ; and the Epistle lesson bids us rejoice in the promise of the free and heavenly Jerusalem, "the mother of us all." Because of these themes, the day has several traditional names: Sometimes it is called "Laetare Sunday", from the first word of the ancient Latin introit, which means 'Rejoice'. Another ancient name is "Dominica Refectionis", which means 'Refreshment Sunday'. And still another traditional name, reflecting the theme of the Epistle, is "Mothering Sunday", and the day has been observed, especially in England, as Mothers' Day.

These several names reflect one basic thought: the homeward journey of our souls is sustained and nourished by the Word of

God in Christ, by that Providence which keeps alive within us the vision of Jerusalem, the City of our freedom, our native land of pure and perfect good. That is the bread which sustains us in the wilderness, and nothing less will ever satisfy the restless heart. St. Paul speaks of the heavenly Jerusalem as “the mother of us all”. Our mothers give us birth, and nourish us, and guide our steps. So does the heavenly Jerusalem, the Providence of God, give birth to our spirit’s life, and nourish it, and guide its upward way. It is the office of the Church on earth to be an outpost of that true Jerusalem, the free city of the spirit. That is what the word Parish means—a colony, or outpost—and thus, the Church’s task is mothering, with word and sacrament, with discipline and teaching; rebuking and casting out our demons, certainly, but also nourishing our souls with the vision of a higher - and freer life. That is bread in the wilderness, the daily rations for our journey, and the ground of our rejoicing.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims (Isa66:10-13)

“Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice with joy for her, all ye that mourn for her: That ye may suck and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations; that ye may milk out, and be delighted with the abundance of her glory.

Thus saith the Lord: As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you: and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

“Rejoice ye with Jerusalem”. That is the ancient introit verse for this Fourth Sunday in Lent. In the toils of our earthly pilgrimage as we make our way towards the Jerusalem of Christ’s passion, we are called to look up and be refreshed by the vision of our spiritual home, “Jerusalem which is above, and is free, and is the mother of us all.”

For St. Paul, as for the Prophet Isaiah, natural mothering serves as an image, a symbol, of spiritual mothering, and it is a very rich image indeed. Despite the wide-spread breakdown in family life, and the unfortunate devaluation of the role of the mother in recent times, the import of the biblical image is still no doubt fairly clear.

The role of the mother in giving birth to her child, her care in nourishing the infant, her task of training the child and inculcating those disciplines and virtues which make us civilized human beings: all this is part of what motherhood means, and all this has its analogue in the birth and development of our spiritual life.

“Ye must be born again”, Jesus told Nicodemus. “But how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” No, of course not. Still, there is a new birth; and “unless a man be born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, ye must be born again.” There is a new birth, a new starting point, the beginning in us of the eternal life of God’s kingdom, God’s Jerusalem, the City of Peace, which is above and is free, and is our mother. By God’s grace, we are given a new starting point, a new standpoint, a new context of life.

“Beloved, now are we the sons of God.”

But this new life of ours requires a lot of mothering, and will hardly survive without it. We need the nutriment of Word and Sacrament, the Incarnate Word, Who has come down from heaven to be the life of the world, the divine nutriment of which the miracle story in today's Gospel lesson speaks to us. We need guidance and comfort in the childish confusions and distresses which are part of our growing up. We need the inculcation of those virtues of faith and hope and charity which will make us mature citizens of God's city. We need to be civilized in God's kingdom, and that requires a lot of mothering.

Our spiritual life requires a lot of mothering, and that is the proper activity of the Church. That is what we mean by the "cure of souls. "We are indeed reborn; we are indeed the sons of God. But our infant steps are halting and uncertain; we stumble, and need a mother's comforting. Only slowly, word by word, do we learn to speak the language of God's kingdom, the language of adoration.

Perhaps we've hardly even learned our letters. Faith is indeed God's gracious gift; and yet we must learn it day by day. Hope must be tested by temptation to despair, and our charity must be refined from worldly loves, until our knowing and our willing become fixed upon the eternal good, from which nothing can separate us. "For I am persuaded", says St. Paul, "that neither life, nor death, nor angels, nor principalities, nor power, nor things present nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Next Sunday, we enter upon the season of passiontide. The Church's calendar moves us towards a point of crisis: the dying of the Son of God. Death is a crisis, like no other crisis; and it is inevitably and inescapably our crisis. It is the final persuasion to despair. Even Jesus cries out from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." Before that naked fact, all our

worldly goods and hopes and ambitions seem to be reduced to utter nonsense, complete absurdity.

This Fourth Sunday in Lent, this “Mothering Sunday”, “mothers” us. It prepares us to meet that crisis, to face it honestly and steadily, by establishing a certain perspective of promise; by setting before us a vision of a final and eternal good, a vision of the heavenly city, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. By that vision our faith and hope are sustained and fortified; and even through the darkness and apparent hopelessness of Passiontide, we are to rejoice with, the heavenly Jerusalem; and our love is to be “delighted with the abundance of her glory.”

“For thus saith the Lord; As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you, and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”

AMEN