

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cheesefare Sunday 2014

As I have been preparing for Lent this past week, I came across the Lenten pastoral letter of Pope Francis and Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. The two letters are really very similar in what they are trying to get Christians to reflect on as we enter the Great Fast, with both focusing on the responsibility of Christians to care for the poor and destitute and to express in concrete ways our solidarity with them during the Lenten season. Pope Francis calls on Catholics to remember that *“In imitation of our Master, we Christians are called to confront the poverty of our brothers and sisters, to touch it, to make it our own and to take practical steps to alleviate it”*, while Bishop Katherine invites Episcopalians *“to think about the ancient traditions of preparing in solidarity with candidates for baptism, to think about the old disciplines of prayer and fasting and alms-giving and study, through the focus on those beyond our communities, in the developing world, who live in abject poverty”*.

As I read these texts I was simultaneously encouraged but also troubled. Encouraged because they serve as a reminder to me that words are not enough and that professing the faith without action is, as the Pope says, “just spouting hot air”. I was troubled, however, because these letters forced me to ask the question, “Why is this so difficult for us?” Why, even when we think something is good do we find it so difficult to put into practice? Why is it so easy to pay lip-service to what we see as right, but then fail to even want to act on it?

At this point, I think we need to pause and back up to another question, a prior kind of question, and that question is this- what kind of human being am I and what kind of human being am I called to be and want to be? This, I think, is the real Lenten question. Bishop Katherine hit on this question at the beginning of her letter when she said that in Lent the Christian community is engaged in preparing itself in solidarity with candidates getting ready for baptism, and that's right. Lent is about us getting ready for baptism. In the case of Greg, our catechumen here at St. Elizabeth's, this is literally the case. He will be immersed in the font and come out someone new. For the rest of us, Lent is about getting ready to revisit once again what it means *for us* to be baptized. To think about what it means to be baptized is to think about what kind of human being I am and what kind of human being I want to be.

As soon as the question is phrased this way, what we see is that there is, or there might be, a gap, a divergence, between the two things- between what *I am* and what I *want to be*. And Lent is about training myself through the disciplines of prayer, fasting and almsgiving, first of all to face this possibility of a gap in my life and then to begin to actually do something about it. In other words, in the church when we "think" about something, we don't just sit in a corner somewhere and abstractly ponder ideas. To think about something in a Christianly-kind-of-way means that we act, we engage in certain disciplines that have the possibility of changing me, of helping me to understand myself better, of enabling me to see more clearly who I actually am. When I fast, and when I pray, and when I engage in almsgiving, I am, in effect, engaged, in a Christianly kind of way, reflecting on who and what I am and what I want to become.

The gospels for today in both the Roman and Byzantine lectionaries push us to act in this way. When Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, tells his disciples to stop *worrying* about life, to stop *worrying* about things like food, and drink and clothing, he certainly is not saying that these things are unimportant; otherwise why should we make the effort to ensure that everyone has his/her just share in these things? What Jesus is saying is that we need to look at our lives and try to see what it is or who it is that I'm actually trusting in, who or what it is that is functioning as my god, my lord, my ultimate concern. As Pope Francis says, "*When power, luxury and money become idols, they take priority over the need for a fair distribution of wealth. Our consciences thus need to be converted to justice, equality, simplicity and sharing.*"

When I begin to pray and to fast and to give more to those in need- things that begin to push me to think about what reliance on, and trust in, God actually looks like and feels like- the first thing that often happens is that I don't want to do these things, I balk at the discipline, in fact I can become really annoyed at the whole Lenten idea. When I am honest with myself, I have to admit that I would really rather try to serve *both* God and mammon, because the "God only" option seems terribly frightening. And it is right there, right at the point of my discomfort and my annoyance and my fear that I need to ask myself, "Who am I? What kind of person am I really? What kind of human being do I honestly want to be?" Am I not actually more content to trust in the gods that I have grown accustomed to? Are not the idols of my life, the mammon that I seek, the "treasures on earth that I have stored up" that I can touch and feel and see far more easily than this God of Jesus, are not these the real comforts and consolers of my life?

I think that the first thing that Lent does for us is to make us confront the truth of Jesus' words', "*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*". There is almost nothing better than fasting, and prayer and almsgiving to force me to meet eyeball to eyeball that reality!

In a similar kind of way, I can talk piously and righteously about being merciful and forgiving but never actually do it in the concrete with real live human beings. The Byzantine practice of beginning Lent, which will happen at the Liturgy this afternoon, with the rite of mutual forgiveness, again forces me to do something concretely to and with other people. My body bends to the ground, the words, "forgive me" come out of my mouth, and the flesh of my cheeks touches the flesh of another person. I can, of course, fake the meaning of all this, I can reduce it to a pure and isolated ritual action, but through the Rite I am at least confronted with an act that may just force me to ask myself: Is this the kind of human being I really am- a forgiving human being? Is this the kind of human being I want to be, especially as I begin to ponder that my time on this earth is not unlimited and that it will come an end.

In that sense, if I had my wish, it would be that this entire parish, both Roman and Byzantine, would celebrate both the Rite of mutual forgiveness at the Liturgy this afternoon and the Rite of imposing ashes with the words, "remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return" on Ash Wednesday. Together these two beginnings of Lent very powerfully push the Lenten question: And what kind of human being am I? What kind of human being do I want to be?

As we stand on cusp of Lent, I am struck by the honesty that the season is asking of us. In order to believe the gospel and bear the fruit of the gospel in my life, in order to seek first God's Kingdom and its righteousness, and in order to become all that I possibly can be in this life, I need first of all to face, with all the honesty and all the integrity that I can muster, the kind of person that I am right now. I need to face the minimalism of my commitment as a disciple of Jesus. I need to face how easily I can allow words rather than actions to be enough. I need to face the very uncomfortable truth that the treasures which I really value are often far from the treasures that Jesus spoke about. I need to identify the gods and lords in my life that I actually trust in even while paying lip-service to the God and Father of Jesus. I need to remember all the times when words like mercy and forgiveness have fallen so easily from my lips but have been absent from my real relationships with people.

These are hard things to do, I know, but they are necessary things to do. Necessary not because God wants me to feel badly about myself, but because God wants, desires, longs for, a change in my life, a conversion of my heart and mind to everything we say whenever we celebrate the Eucharist. Lent, with its tools of fasting, prayer and almsgiving, is given to us not as a form of punishment or self-imposed suffering, but as a time and season of honesty and of change. May God help all of us to receive it as a real gift and a real step towards becoming fully alive in Christ.