

What is today, the fourth Sunday of Lent, traditionally called by Anglicans? It is known as "Mothering Sunday," and this name derives from today's epistle lesson, which has been the reading since at least medieval times. Chapter 4, verse 23 of St. Paul's letter to the Galatians reads, "Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all." Traditionally, it was the practice on this Sunday to go visit one's mother church, either the church in which one was baptized or the diocesan cathedral if the journey was too burdensome to attend the former. In modern times, this Sunday in England has also taken on more of a flavor of our American Mother's Day with the focus more on the mothers of our homes than upon Mother Church.

In the epistle, St. Paul sets up a contrast through the story of Abraham and his sons. Ishmael was the son of the servant Hagar, born "after the flesh." Isaac, on the other hand, was the son of Abraham's bride, Sarah, the son "by promise." And St. Paul extends this comparison to two mountains and two covenants, as well. Hagar is Sinai, the mountain of the giving of the law. Sarah is Jerusalem, the location of the temple, the mount which represents God's dwelling place with man. Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. Sinai is connected with the law and the bondage thereof. The argument here is that the progeny of love surpasses that of bondage.

What do we mean by this? What is St. Paul's point in this analogy? Earlier in chapter 4, Paul describes that a young child is no different than a servant. Both are under authority and expected to do what is commanded. One big difference that St. Paul mentions is that the son is the heir, and he shall become a freed man and thus is trained to be so. The servant remains a servant. He is trained to serve, not to rule. And the servant will always be under the law.

Eventually the son will come of age and will be over the law of the household. Does this mean that he is at liberty to flout the law of the household? No, for the law establishes the parameters and the vision of a well-run house. Sons remain obedient to the law out of loyalty to the law and to honor the patriarch. Yet they are not concerned so much with the letter, but with the spirit. They are not condemned by the law, but in a sense become the law and act in accordance to it while enjoying the liberties of sonship for the well-being of the household.

The servant and the son might spend their youth together, but the servant will always be under the letter of the law. So it was with us. We are sons and daughters of the householder now, but not originally so. We were raised up from the position of servant and made heirs with the Son. Now the Mosaic law was the teacher of humanity, as it were. In it

the Jewish people learned of the character of God and the requirements of holiness. But this was not to affirm their permanent positions as servants to the law, but to nurture them into sonship. Alas, the Jewish people did not learn this lesson. They became so fixated upon the law that they lost sight of the law-giver. Ultimately, it is not obedience to the letter that God desires, it is loyalty and honor to the Father that is desired. It is that the servants should learn to love. The law of God must lead us to the love of God.

Such categories speak to the respective mothers of the children as well. The maidservant is not loved of the patriarch, for she is not the bride, the wife. The servant is under requirements and expectations, and may be punished for breaking the rules. The latter is the beloved of the father. She lives in the bounty of the household. She is not bound lawfully to the rules, though she in wisdom intuits the rules, knowing the household and loving the Father of the household. And these positions, the slave vs. the free, translate into the generosity with which the children are reared. Sons enjoy the blessing of their beloved mothers and live in the freedom of their mothers. The servant can never know such freedom, for he is held in all accounts to the law; and yet a strict obedience to the law doesn't earn reward from the patriarch, it just avoids punishment. Sons enjoy relationship wherein there is true pleasure. Servants are alienated from such a relationship.

Now what about us? We are to receive this analogy in order to inform our understanding of our salvation. We must ask ourselves, "Are we motivated in our obedience by external laws and rules and expectations/ or have we learned to love what is good, and therefore, what is of God?" Let us take the current season of Lent by way of example. Are our Lenten disciplines forced upon us? Or do we enter into them by our own volition because we know that they are good and healthful for us?

At the commencement of this season, we discussed some of the many reasons why fasting is good for our spiritual growth. It helps us, for example, to become masters over our bodies instead of being ruled by our passions and urges. In fasting, we follow the example of Christ who denied Himself food for 40 days so that He would be perfected in obedience through resisting the temptations of the devil when He was at His most vulnerable. This was preparation for the life of sacrifice to which he was called for the redemption of the world – that is, for you and for me. Likewise we too must learn to resist temptation and to sacrifice in love for the salvation of the world. Fasting teaches us to live by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God, rather than by bread alone. The self-denial of fasting makes us think about the the self-denial of our Lord Jesus on our behalf. Hunger pains are therefore a

reminder to us during Lent that Jesus endured suffering for us. They are also a cry to God, a prayer, made by our bodies not by our rationality.

There is nothing new here in this summary of fasting except to realize that this spiritual discipline, like all spiritual disciplines, requires volunteerism. They might be imposed in some way (perhaps it is just the expectation of the parish which one attends), but will one accept them in the attitude of following the Law, keeping them as an external imposition while rebelling in heart? This, in essence, makes a person a son of the bond-woman, externally compelled to participate. Or will the individual submit to the higher law, embracing such disciplines because wisdom and the experience of Holy Mother Church has established them to be beneficial to the soul?

This is the principle that St. Paul is trying to communicate to us. In Christ we have liberty, but that does not mean license. By enlivening and illuminating our hearts through the waters of baptism, God has elevated us from slaves to sons. We are not bound by the law, but we are called to incarnate the Law, to take it into ourselves, to embrace it fully into our hearts so that we become the fulfillment of the Law through Christ Jesus. He was the true Son who submitted Himself to fasting, torment, torture, and death because of the greater glory to be won for Himself as God, and for all of Creation as existing in Him. Brothers and sisters, it is not yet time for our final glorification. On this earth, we are called to be like Jesus and to humble ourselves and to receive the hard chastening of our souls. This is not a platitude. Life is hard, but thanks be to God, life in Jesus is also the best good to be had. True freedom rests not in doing what one wants to do in our fallen selves. True freedom is found in loving to do what is godly, in desiring what is good, in being what we were intended to be.

And thanks be to God that we are not called to be Sons and Daughters apart from our Mother, the Church. We live in the bounty of the household. We have, in the Body of Christ, everything we need to brave the venture of truly being a Christian. In other words, this means following in the footsteps of Christ, living a Christ-like, sacrificial, self-giving, life motivated by love, not compelled by law. Let us take stock of just what spiritual resources we have available to us as members of Christ.

First we have the spirit of God living in us, and the Spirit renews our minds so that we can understand what is good and right and lovely. The Spirit prompts us to love and to good works, and speaks confidence to our hearts when we are plagued by doubt. The Holy Spirit enables us to be sensitive to spiritual matters and reorders our affections so that over time we learn to love what we ought to love.

Also, Mother Church is the true community of the world. In our Bonhoeffer study this

week, we discussed that we are truly and uniquely united with each other in Christ, that we receive one another's personhood through our union with Christ, and that we will joyously fellowship together eternally because of Christ. We are to share each other burdens as laborers together in the world. We are to continually lift each other up in prayer. We are to sacrifice for each other as best we can serving each other in love. Know that this will never be convenient, but is this not the call to sacrificial love of the brotherhood? Is this not what it means to be part of the family of God? To serve and to be served? To bless and to be blessed? To pray and to be prayed for?

Finally, in Mother Church we have the sacraments, the gifts of grace provided by God through His church to directly strengthen us in His love. First there is Baptism, wherein we are made members of Christ and adopted into the family of Christ, the Church, "Jerusalem which is above [and] is free, which is the Mother of us all." Then there are the minor sacraments which pertain to various events and stages of life. These include confirmation, anointing and visitation of the sick, confession, the solemnization of marriage, thanksgiving after childbirth, holy unction (known better as last rites), and the burial of the dead. There is also included ordination, if this be one's calling, wherein God gives men grace to serve as His ministers to His Bride, the Church. All of these are available to you through the Church to help you on your way. The Church also provides for teaching so that we can understand God and our faith in Him better. Also through the Church one can receive counseling or spiritual direction to help us understand ourselves better and grow in the knowledge and love of God.

Lastly, of course, the strengthening grace of God that we need for our journey in faith is provided for us in the Eucharist, Holy Communion. In Christ there is unlimited abundance. There is that fount of living water that is never depleted. There is that bread which is unceasingly broken for us and given to us. We see this directly in the gospel lesson this morning. Jesus Christ is that heavenly manna that feeds us throughout our lives. We humans look at the externals, we see just five measly loaves and two fish. "But what are they among so many?" Jesus sees the divine reality and desires to open our eyes so that we too may see and partake of the abundance of kingdom life. For us this isn't about filling our stomachs. For us, it is about filling our spirits so that we would be able to give our daily bread to fill another, so that our nourishment would be found in every Word that proceedeth from the mouth of God. Such food as this is not comprehended in a moment, but it is given to us in constancy and love every step of our way. We are naturally such grasping creatures. But smiling, God says to His hungry and clamoring children, "Be at peace, there is plenty to

go around. My Bride, your Mother, will see that you are well fed.”

Do we deserve such careful and loving attention? No indeed. We, for our evil deeds, do worthily deserve to be punished. But our Father loves His children, and His property is always to have mercy. And our Mother will tend to our needs out of love for Her Husband and for Her Children. She will minister the comfort of God's grace so that we may mercifully be relieved. Let us be grateful this morning for the loving kindness of God in Christ by the Holy Spirit who has provided so much for us through our Mother the Church. May we endeavor to be worthy children, through our gratitude for His grace as found in the Church, and through our love for each other, and our love for those outside of this family. Now come to the table of the Lord, be nourished in faith so that you will have strength to serve Jesus in the world in the days ahead. Our God shall supply all our needs. AMEN.