

Today we mark an ending, the ending of the old ecclesiastical year, and are called upon to prepare for the new year.

God is always doing a new thing. He is always calling us to come higher up, closer to Him. The challenge for the Christian is to know Him better, not just in an intellectual way, but in a transformative way, that we would be better image bearers in this world. So the ending of our year isn't really an ending. It is a reminder that in Christ all things are beginning, all things are continually refreshed. Our new year therefore is a continual encouragement to us, to reach forward to God, to press onward in the love for and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we are not, this Sunday, called upon to rest on last year's accomplishments, however many or few they be. Rather we are called to action.

In the collect we prayed, "Stir up, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people," and this Sunday is often called "Stir-up Sunday" for that reason. It is not about an emotional stirring up—though certainly we want to be emotionally engaged in the new thing that God is doing. Emotions will come and go, so we rather want our resolve to be solidified, and pray that our wills would be fixed upon obedience to God's law, and that we would therefore be used of God to further His kingdom—not just in the world, but in our lives.

Today we are focused not so much upon the coming of the King, which, beginning next week, is our primary Advent theme. Instead, we are focused upon being open to the work which God does in us, which is ever new. We are focused upon re-committing ourselves, resolving once again to engage our wills to God's service.

This is one of those few Sundays on which, in our Epistle, we are directed to hear not to the voices of the Apostles, but rather that of the prophets, and specifically this week the Prophet Jeremiah. The Morning Prayer lesson we read was from Jeremiah chapter 3. We have various themes in this lesson - first, we have a reaffirmation of the covenant relationship between God and His people. The Lord says, "Return, O backsliding children, for I am married to you. ... I will bring you to Zion." God knows His own, and He is here gathering them unto Himself and providing both knowledge and shepherds to them for their well being. He is providing for their health and salvation.

Now of course in the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, we think of the ethnic people of Israel, and the defining event in the history of Israel is the Exodus, when God freed His people from their oppressors in Egypt. God brought them out with a strong hand and all the nations of the earth understood that they were His special people. They were His bride, His spouse, and God especially watched over them. The visible symbol of the presence of God with His people was the ark of the covenant. Yet in Jeremiah 3:16, we see that in the days to come, God would gather His people anew. He would be doing a new thing so that the events of the Exodus would no longer be the definitive mark of His People. The ark would be forgotten. Its significance would be overshadowed by a new covenant. God would do a new thing.

Would God no longer be present with His people? No, of course God would be with His people, but the presence of God would no longer be symbolized by the ark, the gilded chest which resided beyond the sight and touch of His people in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. Rather, God Himself would be with His people, accessible, imminent. The Throne of the Lord would be established in Jerusalem, and the Name of the Lord would be written upon the hearts of His people, for they would no longer follow the self-centered desires of their hearts. They would be overwhelmed by the righteousness of God.

And God would no longer belong exclusively to the Jewish people; all nations would be gathered to the presence of God, to Jerusalem, incorporated into the original covenant people of God, who would be reunited and whole once again. If you recall, the Northern ten tribes had been captured and exiled by the Assyrian Empire; they had been dispersed throughout the empire and lost. And Jeremiah would also witness the same thing happening to the Southern Kingdom, primarily comprised of the tribe of Judah. All twelve tribes would be eliminated from the promised land. But the prophet here is foretelling of a reconstitution of God's people that would include all of the Hebrews, both the Kingdoms of Israel and of Judah, along with others who He called from all of the nations of the earth. God is doing a new thing, a more glorious thing. Salvation is for all people, not just for the twelve tribes of Israel.

Now if Jeremiah is anything, he is consistent, for we see similar themes in the epistle lesson today, from the 23rd chapter of his book. In that reading, we see God raising up an heir of

David as King, who shall reign over both Kingdoms of the Hebrews - over Israel in the North and Judah in the South. This new kingdom is characterized by righteousness for in it are found sound judgement, justice, and protection for the people. And again, we see that this is not a rehashing of the old covenant that God made with Moses, but is a new establishment of the Covenant. The text says, "They shall no more say, the Lord liveth, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt." Instead this people will be defined by the re-gathering together of all of God's children that had been dispersed throughout the world. Their sins had caused them to be driven into exile, but the Lord's righteousness would draw them together anew. God is doing a new thing.

As part of the New Covenant people of God, our story is no longer rooted in the Exodus from Egypt. He is gathering us, His people, into the promised land from all over the world. There we, brought into the Church through baptism, enjoy His very presence and the peace and plenty which He provides.

The Prophet Jeremiah was pointing to a future time when the Kingdom would be renewed, when the promised land would be transformed into a more glorious and more permanent kingdom for the righteousness of God would dwell there in the very person of Jesus Christ. Will this kingdom look like the other kingdoms of the world, with fixed geographic boundaries, with armies and castles and peasants and nobles? No for the Kingdom of God is ultimately fulfilled in the renewed heavens and the renewed earth when things will be much different. For now, the Kingdom of God is found throughout the world in the people of God who have been brought together as one, who have been gathered and remade into the righteous priest-kings of the one Triune God.

We often read today's gospel lesson with a focus upon the miracle— Christ feeds the five thousand, beginning with just five loaves and two fishes. Yet we need to see beyond the outward sign to the thing signified. The Apostle John here is showing Christ to be the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. Christ is the messiah as those may readily know who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

The reading begins, "When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him...." Jesus is the gatherer. As the Son of God, He was the most compelling, attracting person that ever was. People flocked to Him for many reasons. Some came to Him for healing, for He miraculously healed those who had no reasonable hope of healing other than

Jesus. Some came to Him because of His teaching, for no human teacher of the Jews could unfold the Word of God like Jesus could, for Jesus was Himself the Word that had come into the world. For some people, Jesus was the only one that could see beyond the broken and diseased and rejected bodies to understand the pain and the rejection and the sorrow that they had endured. Here was something new. Here was the true presence of God that had come to bring wholeness and healing to the world. Here was the righteous root of David, who was come to claim His throne and to gather in His people through the provision of Himself.

Christ looked out upon the multitudes and saw the nobility of His Kingdom in formation. They were sheep without a shepherd, but He would claim them as His own, and He would guide them to green pastures where they could be fed and watered and protected. And this is precisely what He does in taking the loaves and the fish, giving thanks to His heavenly Father, breaking them and giving them to feed his people. He loves them with an eternal, sacrificial love, and He ever brings them into a new land flowing with milk and honey.

What we must not miss in the Gospel is that Jesus commands the fragments to be gathered, and that there is twelve baskets over and above what was eaten. This is not because Jesus was a poor estimator of how much bread he needed to feed the multitudes. The gathering of the fragments and the number of the baskets represent the gathering in of the reconstituted people of God. This represents the new twelve tribes of Israel. The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah are brought back into the land with Jesus Christ Himself, as God very present with His People, reigning as their King. The Apostle John here shows Christ as the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy some 6 centuries previous.

One of the implications here, especially evident throughout the remainder of John chapter 6, is that as Christ is the bread of heaven, broken for us, so too are we now the fragments of bread that have been regathered together. We each of us must first be broken. We must come to the end of ourselves in order that we may know only Christ. As Christ's body broken feeds us weekly, so we too in our brokenness become food for the world—not, of course, that we are the Eucharist, for that is all of Christ. But as Christ feeds us and gives us of Himself, we then take the grace which we have received into the world. The brokenness in our lives makes us fit to bring grace to the world. We therefore become Christ to the world, continuing to gather in more and more of the New Israel to worship around the table of the Lord. We are fed with Christ, and in Christ we feed the world.

As we come to the end of the Trinity season, the season of growth in the knowledge and love of God, of growth in Holiness, be reminded that God is doing something new in us and in the church, for every life brought in to the church is a renewal of the people of God. Every time we gather around the table of the Lord, we are renewed again in our spirits. Every day we arise refreshed to return with gratitude, our love and service to God, for because of Christ, our love and service truly rejoice the heart of our Maker and our Redeemer.

Are you excited about what God is doing? His kingdom has come, and through our obedience may His kingdom expand until His will is done in every heart. My challenge for you this week is to share some of the good things that are happening in your life or in our parish with an acquaintance who is not Christian. Now I realize that there are always some of us who are enduring life's difficulties, and that it is hard to feel excited when you are in the midst of the storm. These are the times when our will particularly needs stirring-up, and our resolve to follow Christ through the dark night of the soul needs to be reaffirmed. Be assured that God is always there with you, that you are not forgotten. Also realize that being honest about your struggles with others is as important as, if not more important than, only being excited about your triumphs. Let someone know that Christ loves you, and that you love Christ. This doesn't have to be a polished presentation. It can be as simple as a passing comment, "I am glad that Christ is with me, and that my Church is there for me too." The sharing of such a sentiment is not only a testament to others of the genuine presence of Christ with His people, but will establish the reality of His presence more surely in our hearts and in our minds.

And now as new creatures in Christ, may our lives always reflect the love that God has for us and the glory that He has revealed to us. May we daily be open to and excited for the new things that God is doing in Jesus Christ. May we this week desire to be more involved in the ever-new work of God. Our Christian year may draw to an end, but our lives in Christ are more about beginnings. His mercies are new every morning. May we be excited to join with God in the new things He is doing.

STIR up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

2023-11-26

Sunday next before Advent

K. Bartel, 6

Amen