

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
on Lent 4: "Refreshment Sunday" (26 March 2006
2 Chronicles 36:14-23; Ephesians 2:4-10; John 6:4-15

Refreshment

The custom for the Fourth Sunday in Lent is to regard this day not only as the midpoint in this special season of spiritual discipline; but traditionally today also speaks of a moment of respite. Consequently, today is known as "Refreshment Sunday."

I personally love this tradition. I look forward to it. It touches my heart, in fact. An it does so because in a simple, tender way this "Refreshment Sunday" tradition summarizes the gospel message. It does so by quietly reminding us of the character of our God: that our God is a God of tender mercy. It also does this by speaking to the content of our faith: that we are invited to learn how to love God and one another more and more because we have already been given what we need – by our God.

"Refreshment Sunday's" purpose reminds us to keep our eyes on the prize and not get distracted. It reminds us of where we are going, in what direction we are headed, and to realize the connection between the prize of life with God and how we handle that prize.

And so, Lent demands some significant personal scrutiny from us, to the point of repentance. Yes, such accountability before God and before one another is usually not fun. Yes, we already have other things to do that demand our time and energy. Why do we need to deal with a demanding God, too?

Poor Lent. It appears to be one demanding thing in our lives that we think we can ignore.

So, in this light, for most of us, there really is no need to have a respite from Lent. There is no need to have a "half-time" break, not from our Lenten disciplines, at least. No, the sad truth for most of us is that we do not need to be "refreshed" from our Lenten disciplines – not nearly as much as we need to be "refreshed" from the way we live our daily lives.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.

[Ephesians 2:8]

What is the character of your God? What is the content of your faith? What is the purpose of your prayer? What is the function of your church?

We hear in the day's gospel that the time of the Passover approached – just as it does at this time in our own day. The passionate memory of their liberation from Pharaoh consistently marked the descendants of Abraham as an Exodus people. Deliverance from enslavement and oppression was and is at the very heart of Judaism. In terms of the content of their faith, Passover stands at the very heart of the Covenant experience.

In this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus is in the Galilee region with a multitude following him because (as St. John conveys) they had seen the profundity of Jesus' healings. Thousands quite literally meandered after him in hopes of receiving the fruits of Jesus' power. As the Lord sat down with his disciples, little did the crowd

realize that Jesus would provide a foretaste of a new Passover in their very midst. For Jesus recognizes the crowd's hunger. It is a double hunger: one stemming from the body's needs; the from the yearning of their souls.

The Lord asks the Twelve what it would take them to feed the throng. Throwing his hands up in frustration, Philip pipes up and reports that six-month's wages would not be enough to buy bread for everyone. Then Andrew, Peter's steady brother, made mention that a lad had fives loaves of bread and two fish, as if that would be helpful in such a context.

Well, you know the rest of the story. 5000 people, gathered on the Lake's hillside, received their fill, to the extent that there was more than the throng could eat.

It is understandable that we might ignore Lent. After all, why should we give up the things that bring us some modicum of comfort, when each day we do battle against life's hardness? Why should we come to church and hear of more work that we need to do, when we can already hear Monday morning growling ominously at us with its heartless demands? And that is precisely my point. We do not need "Refreshment Sunday" because of Lent. Our lives need refreshing. Our souls need refreshing. This is what Lent points out, if we will let it. Yet, how can that happen?

Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, that nothing may be lost."

Lent is one time where we are reminded to make specific room for God and to take to heart the state of our relationship with the Source of all life. And to the extent that we might find Lent's task

difficult or inconvenient or even irrelevant, I remind you of this. The purpose of such scrutiny and effort is to bring us into contact with the truth that God has given us what we need in Christ Jesus; that there is given to us an abundance of the life and love we crave, and all we have to do to ask for it and we will receive the tender mercy of our God.

You and I are fed by God's abundance in Christ. Our life together here at St. Martin's is a sign of the reality of this fact. For when we gather (and it is always so crucial that we gather in community) – when we gather in his Name, the kingdom life emerges in our midst. Whenever we have trusted in the reality of Communion life, surprising abundance comes forth. Just look around and recognize this for yourselves:

- The Memorial Garden;
- The breath-taking creativity of "The Death of the Bishop of Brindisi" and the Haitian School project it will help to build;
- the immediate transformation of the Youth House into a house of refuge and hope for victims of the hurricane – not to mention all that we have done to provide help for that very troubled and broken family;
- the Crayton School project, where members of St. Martin's are stepping forward to meet the need for after school care for middle school children;
- the response for a second clergy person so that trained leadership may rally more of us around ministries that matter, such as the ministry to our youth;
- the countless offering of prayer and presence as tokens of our pledge to one another to be members of Christ's Body.

[John 6:11-12]

There is abundance when we gather in Jesus' Name and when we are open to the life God gives. Sometimes it takes work to remember the

grace; sometimes effort is required in order to receive the gift we have in our midst. For the world tells us in a thousand ways each week that it is everyone for himself or herself, that the ones with the most toys in the end will win. And we believe this because we hear it so often; and try as we might, we never seem to be able to have enough of those toys to make it, to be happy, let alone to save ourselves from fear and death.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that we have already been saved from such fearful desperation and death because our God loves us –with an abundant, eternal love. All we need to do is find ways to pay enough attention to the abundant gift of God's Communion so that we may receive it and give thanks. Then we will need to make sure that we what to do with all the leftovers.

Amen.