

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany
2010

February 7,

Among the treasures of our Episcopal heritage are some wonderful words. In past prayer books the Sundays leading up to Lent had amazing labels -- multi-syllabic, Latin-based, tongue-twisting, melodic and mysterious. Today would have been called Septuagesima and then Sexagesima would come next week. The Latin root *septua* indicates the seventieth day before Easter and then you can guess that *sexua* marks the sixtieth. In earlier practice these days set aside a time for pre-Lenten disciplines but now they seem ancient, outmoded except maybe for Sunday School crossword puzzles.

Aside from my own love of words these strange names seem to me to represent the abundance of our history just as each Sunday's collect carries with it memorials to Scripture, church history and the spiritual practices of generations who have gone before us. They also are reminders of how flexible the church has tried to be over the centuries as both language and daily life have shifted shape and sound. Thomas Cranmer, author of our first Book of Common Prayer in 1549, wrote the original set of collects -- those prayers that gather the the needs of the people -- combining Biblical and pastoral wisdom that has guided our prayers through the centuries. So this morning we are led in our worship through a calendar of readings from the Old and New Testaments and we are praying together in words that draw these together and give us guidance to live by in the week ahead.

As we begin to prepare for both the facing of the work and worries of the week ahead we are also called to think about how we can prepare for the proper uses of the Lenten season of penitence that lies ahead. "Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. " Do you hear the contrast between bondage and liberty? Between our sins and abundant life? Can we feel the pull in our own lives of these opposing forces?

These days with the seemingly endless pain and misery in Haiti it feels like everything I read has some connection with the dreadful disconnect between what the bondage of poverty and destruction of our neighbors to

the south and the material abundance of our lives here in the United States generally and certainly here in this city. Almost any verses we read in any part of the Bible can be interpreted as a call to reach out to those in need close at home and across the world. The prophet Isaiah had a vision in which he was called to serve but he responded as most of us do. His first reaction was to feel unclean and unworthy. We may not use those same words today -- we are more likely to say, "What can I do? I don't have the power or the wisdom or the means to make a difference. The problems are too big, too complicated." "Then [Isaiah] heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" So the call to action was clear. "

And I said, "Here am I; send me!" This is the liberty of abundant life, this ability to answer the cry for help. If we can begin by being aware and grateful for the bounty of blessings in our lives then we can start volunteering to be sent into the world starting in little ways at first. Remember to bring the needed groceries for the Ecumenical Services Ministries Food Pantry then maybe volunteer to shelve donations or answer the phones. These are the ways we are sent forth to touch the lives of others who are suffering or are pushed aside. "Here I am; send me -- send me" to speak kindly to a stranger; to lend a helping hand.

There is always the need to face the bondage of our sins and there, too, we can start with little things. It's surely the small sins that cloud my vision -- the sharp word or the impatience with somebody who seems too slow; the sarcastic answer to get a laugh; or even worse, the turning away from a clear need in a sad face or an anxious tone; the willful ignoring of an unspoken cry for help. "Here am I; send me" ... send me to be thankful for the many blessings in my life and send me to share that strength and that liberty with others. In the psalm the writer says, "I will give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart; ... because of your love and faithfulness; ... When I called, you answered me; you increased my strength within me." Thanksgiving is the best tonic in the world, better than wine or Prozac -- it strengthens us and sends us forth.

These are troubled times -- the stock market alone is enough to make us all feel burdened and then there is the continuing specter of war as we watch Michael and Dan and the young people around us depart for dangerous assignments. The fear of layoffs is all around us and we can ignore such signs as darker streets at night and the growing potholes.

Some of our new graduates are burdened with student loan debts but cannot find work and some of our college students are needing to take semesters off the earn money for tuition. These stresses are making some of us sick and bad health becomes another burden. How can we count our blessings -- how we can be be thankful?

Last week I was talking to a small businessman in the city -- he serves as my local economic barometer and he has been painting a very gloomy picture over the past few months. But this time he said to me that while business is still bad and his colleagues are in trouble, every picture and each report from Haiti causes him to give thanks for what he has. "Going home to a warm house with a clean place to sleep and food to eat -- all those things now seem new to me now," he said, " and I see they are great gifts that I need to share."

It's hard to lift our heads from ourselves and our worries and it's hard to see beyond our own narrow views and today's Gospel shows us that life has always been like that. The fishermen at Lake Gennesaret had worked all night with no success. Over and over again they had thrown the heavy nets overboard and over and over again they had struggled to bring the burden of empty nets back up from the depths. No luck. Finally they gave up, dragged the nets ashore and washed them clean of weeds and sand. There's nothing more tiring or frustrating than to hit a dry spell - in fishing, in business, in spiritual life. Sometimes it seems like the only sane thing to do is to pack it in for a while.

But along comes Jesus who uses Simon Peter's boat as his pulpit and when he finished he directed Peter to put the boat out to deep water and let down the nets again. In his usual very human way, Peter complained that they'd tried all night with no luck. But the blessing of Peter is that we see him time and again getting it right the second or third try. "Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." Not only are the nets filled with an abundant haul of fish, but Peter and James and John are given a new ministry, and we know that these disciples were able to say to Jesus, "Here we are -- send us".

As we come closer to Lent and as we struggle with our own dry times let us use the treasures of our faith to strengthen us -- we can use the antiquated labels (like Septuagesima) of these Sundays before Lent to prepare us for a time of discipline. We have the words of the collect to

help us to pray that we may be set us free of the bondage of our sins, and may be given the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son. The psalm reminds us to give thanks and Isaiah calls us to answer, Here am I; send me." And Peter's example tells us that there is always hope and help.

Amen.