

Lent IV

“*Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all*” (Epistle)

This is a Sunday with many meanings, none of them wrong. Of course we should value our earthly mothers. This historically was perhaps an offshoot of valuing our mother church (particularly for those who usually worshipped in “chapels of ease” but on this day went to the parish church). And the designation of “Refreshment Sunday” takes its rise from the call to “rejoice” in the epistle (and in the opening psalm in times before the Prayer Book). We briefly remember that Christianity is about rejoicing, and Lent a necessary discipline to enable us to resume that Easter rejoicing. The great Lenten hymns of the Western church always mention Easter, for that is the point of it all.

We rejoice, because we have been saved. Christ has lived and died for us, and the Father has raised him, and we are his brethren (Hebrews 2.11-18). We rejoice, because we are in the way of salvation, granted a narrow way and not easy, granted persecution, granted our own failings, but still, this is the way. We rejoice, because “we are travelling home to God”. It is the way of the promise, and it leads to the “Jerusalem which is above”, otherwise called heaven, whose essence is the presence of God himself.

I *could* give you a detailed explanation of the Epistle. Clearly there were first century Jewish Christians who understood it and appreciated it. But it is a bit like explaining jokes; even if the explanation is correct, the joke is no longer funny. This passage is an extreme piece of Rabbinic argumentation, and it worked (then). Curiously, Islam has stolen some of the logic for its own distortions of the meaning of the Old Testament. But we are not Moslems, nor are we Jewish Christians (and even modern orthodox Jews would find the argumentation obscure, for Judaism too has developed since St. Paul).

If we let the technical details of St. Paul's argument go, we can concentrate on the essential message. Christianity is not about a set of human rights. In relation to God, we don't have any (except in so far as God chooses to grant them). It is a perpetual risk in all religions to try to find some right, some reason why God must give me what I want. The most obvious form of this is magic, which seems to be an attempt to control God. *It cannot be done*. I cannot as a priest force Christ to be present in the Holy Communion, nor can we as a congregation do so. Of course, we do not have to try, for Christ is more eager to make himself present than we to receive him. We are right to rely on his promise, just as he relied on his Father (this is made explicit in John 11.41-2).

No, says St. Paul, there are no human rights before God (people who demand their “just deserts” will receive them in hell) but there are God's promises, for “as many as received him”. Do not think that this is remote from Jesus' own teaching – think of the Pharisee and the Publican, or of the “lost sheep” which were at the heart of his mission. We who have maintained the faith in difficult conditions for many years are at particular risk of thinking we have built up some sort of claim on God. *It cannot be done*. All that we are is of God's mercy towards us. But that is a matter not for irritation, still less for despair, but for rejoicing. For “of his fulness we all received, and grace for grace.” (John 1.16)

Sometimes the best meditation is made on the simplest material. Perhaps we would do well in these last weeks of Lent to ponder these lines from a minor hymn-writer who at least understood that Christianity is a matter of delight and confidence, not in ourselves but in God:

There is plentiful redemption in the Blood that has been shed,

There is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.

'Tis not all we owe to Jesus, it is something more than all
Greater love because of evil, larger mercy through the fall.

If our love were but more simple we would take him at his word
And our lives would be all sunshine in the sweetness of the Lord.

(*F. W. Faber – unfortunately both Ancient and Modern Revised 364 and English Hymnal 499 select different verses so it is difficult to reconstruct the author's original composition.*)

Lent may be a sombre time, but it is a time of Christian hope and leads to Christian rejoicing. We need God's help, and he gives it.