

Fourth Sunday in Lent (06/03/05)

Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. (the Epistle).

Today is a confusing Sunday in the calendar. The modern observance of “Mothering Sunday” is rather commercial, though for once it has ancient basis, and how could we neglect the “first of the Commandments with promise” (Ephesians 6.2), to honour our father and our mother? An older title is “Refreshment Sunday” - a slight break from the rigours of Lent.

Most of the readings in Lent are focused on the great struggle against the world, the flesh and the devil which our baptism into Christ leads into, just as he was himself tempted. We should be clear that Christianity offers “naught for your comfort”, no easy guarantees of peace and quiet.

However, today is different. We are reminded that the Lord does delight in refreshing not just his own followers, but his hearers generally. He refreshes them with bread and fish, and at another time with wine, and that lavishly - he does not dole out his generosity in a carefully measured and limited way, but freely. If we do not find his generosity in bodily matters to our taste, then we will probably get his spiritual generosity wrong too “for he giveth not the Spirit by measure” (John 3.34). Beware of finding yourself playing the part of the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son, or of those who laboured all twelve hours in the vineyard.

The Gospel reading may be easy to understand, but what of the Epistle? The excuse for its selection lies in the words I have quoted at the start of this note. But how does St. Paul get there?

Clearly we start from Genesis 16 (the birth of Abraham's son Ishmael to a slave woman, Hagar) and Genesis 21 (how Sarah drove them out after the birth of Isaac).

Now part of what St. Paul does with the story is utterly conventional; Ishmael was only a child of the marriage to Sarah by the merest legal fiction, and God's promises to Abraham would only be fulfilled in the child of promise, borne to Sarah herself.

This would seem to suit those who prided themselves on their Jewish descent only too well. But that is the opposite of St. Paul's view. Hagar wanders off into the wilderness - which leads him to think of Mount Sinai, where Moses received not just the Ten Commandments, but the whole complicated edifice of the Jewish law, complete in every last detail and all to be equally observed. (So said the Jewish teachers.) To St. Paul, that is a system of slavery and those who embrace it are trapped in all the observances of Herod's all too earthly temple in Jerusalem.

Christians are not part of that system, but of God's original promise, now fulfilled in Abraham's one *ultimate* offspring - not Isaac, but Christ.

You don't have to enjoy St. Paul's sense of humour, but I think that is what it is. And behind it is a very proper following of the Lord's own teaching. It was all too easy then, and it is still tempting now, to reduce Christianity to a slightly improved form of Judaism. The Lord did not come to give us a better list of commandments, but so that we should be “sons of God” (Galatians 3.26).

Lent looks forward to the baptisms which then took place at Easter, when “as many of you as were baptised into Christ did put on Christ” (Galatians 3.27). This is the beginning of life in the heavenly Jerusalem, and we can freely respond to God who has so blessed us. Not that there are no limits; we still have to resist the world, the flesh and the devil, but we do so less by multiplying rules than by the power of the Spirit.

The readings are those of the Prayer Book