

Sermon: 2020/09/20 (16th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) - Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6,37-45; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16_BTR

[Ask for children to come forward. Two wrapped gifts: one very big and the other small. And a big, black sharpie.]

Life is a Gift: Paul on the subject of it 'is far better' to 'be With Christ'.

I need a volunteer!
(Just one.)

[Child steps forward.]

Great.

Ok - imagine that its your birthday.

And your dad walks into the room and places two gifts on the floor for you.

One *very* large one.

And a teensy little one.

[Write name of child on front of both gifts.]

What do you do?

[Child rushes to grab hold of the biggest - probably.]

Right!

So, shall I just throw your other gift in the trash, then?

[Got to pick it up. Child contradicts.]

No?

Why?

You still want it?!

[Wait for response.]

Of course you do!

Because they are *both yours*.

So, what am I trying to illustrate by this exercise? [Pause.]

If "Heaven" is sooo great, as preachers claim - *as I claim(!)*, why not just lie down and die? (Right now.)

Why don't we just give up on this life?

After all, it can be hard sometimes, can't it?

And painful

And dirty.

And lonely.

Full of bullying and disappointment.

So why do we even bother?

I mean, if it is true that Christians will rise from the dead as Christ did at Easter, and reign with Him in paradise, why take another breath?

And why too, then, does the Church teach against abortion and euthanasia?

Paul has something to say to us about these things this morning, actually.

Yes, he says it is 'far better' 'to depart and be with Christ', 'but', he continues, 'to remain in the flesh is more necessary'.

What does he mean?

Well, it might help to picture this life and the next-life-with-Jesus as the two birthday gifts from before.

And there's no denying that one of the these "birthday gifts" is far bigger and more wonderful and exciting and desirable than the other.

But that doesn't mean you throw away the other one without opening it, does it?

No!

You gratefully and gleefully accept *both* gifts.

Because two is always better than one!

A gift is still a gift.

And this life, though it has its difficulties and its discomforts, *is* still a gift worth possessing for as long as you can keep it.

Sacred and special in its own way.

A gift that God *needn't* have given *at all* to you and to me.

So we must *treasure* it - every second, every feeling and relationship - *even* the bad ones.

[Ask children to return to their places.]

"Full-Belly" Christianity

In 1943, the American-Ukrainian-Jewish psychologist, Abraham Maslow - born in Brooklyn, New York, proposed a theory - now very famous, called: "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs."

It reflected - it created a model of - something that we all, *instinctively*, know to be more-or-less true about our species.

Which is that, basically, a human person isn't motivated or able to think creatively; to...think "higher thoughts" - about composing a beautiful symphony (of music), for example, or chiselling a handsome statue from a block of marble, or to write a sermon, even - if they are very hungry; if they are *starving*.

And even if they are very hungry or starving they won't give it - their empty belly - a moment's thought if they are struggling to breathe; if they're being asphyxiated. And so on.

And this seems undeniable, doesn't it?

- That each of us possesses this internal set of appetites - for food, for sex, for status, for self-expression, *for oxygen* - and some are more fundamental than the others.

So let's say I wake up tomorrow morning yearning for my Lucky Charms (cereal), but a masked-man with murderous intent breaks into my house at that very second wielding a knife, I don't hang around to grab a spoon or the milk.

No, I run.

In the opposite direction, as fast as I can.

And let's say I was a novelist - about to write the final chapter of my masterpiece.

Well, I don't return to my typewriter until *after* I know the police have chased that "masked man" away, and *after* having fulfilled the earlier task of breakfast.

And then none of those other things matter at all - not even the "masked man" - if I'm stuck underwater without SCUBA-diving gear.

Today, in our reading from the Old Testament, we join the Israelites in their journey from Egypt back to Canaan, the "Promised Land."

Now, remember: in Egypt they had been slaves; the *property* of the indigenous population.

We were told that they were 'oppressed' [Ex. 1:12].

We were told that 'their lives [were] bitter with hard service; that their Egyptian overlords were 'ruthless' toward them.

And they really were!

"Ruthless," that is.

They had tried to, systematically, kill all the Israelite baby boys.

What is that?

Eugenics?

Forced sterilisation of an ethnic minority?

As a moral evil, that's something comparable to certain practices of the Nazis!

The Israelites, then, had been *absolutely* right to seek God's help for an escape to return to their homeland:

Egypt had become a *living*-nightmare for them, and surely *nothing* could give them reason to regret their miraculous "exodus."

But oh wait!

Look at our text:

we hear that 'the whole congregation complained against Moses and Aaron', his brother, and were wistfully reminiscing about the "good ol' days" of their *dreadful* captivity in the clutches of a genocidal, pagan nation.

Is this madness?

No - just convenient, *selective* self-deception.

What we hear is that the Israelites had begun to create for themselves a new *narrative* - about how things hadn't been so bad in Egypt, because at least they 'ate our fill of bread': [16:3].

And how does God respond?

Not with justified anger.

Instead, He, we see, sends an abundant "rainfall" of 'manna' and 'quail' to 'test' the Israelites: [v.4].

Because, is this *really* about 'bread'?

Yes, in an immediate sense:

The 'unleavened' [12:15] provisions prepared before the Passover were exhausted, and there hadn't been any diners or Dollar Generals on the route out of Egypt - especially not for 'six hundred thousand' Israelites: [v.37].

But God suspected - *He knew* - that there was a *deeper* issue here.

About - and I quote (from verse four): 'whether they will follow my instruction or not.'

In other words, did the Israelites actually *trust* in God's *leadership*?

Because their complaint exposed; it *communicated* something *ugly* - that their commitment to Him was "up for grabs;" *negotiable; contingent* - "contingent" on the *instant* gratification of their want for a hot meal.

Their complaint *suggested*; it *implied* that they weren't following Him because of who He was - the Creator of the universe, but that that they cared for Him only and insofar as He met their *needs*.

And we might find ourselves doing the same.

We might be "tying" our commitment; our *enthusiasm*; our church-attendance; *our faith* to the extent to which our desires and appetites are being fed.

Are we?

Are we only "full belly / fair weather" Christians?

Because the world is watching the Church - you and me - right now, very closely, and what are we showing them?

Are showing them that the truth about Jesus and God the Father is glorious and that they are worthy of our worship even when there are forest-fires and virus-pandemics and hurricanes?

Are we communicating that we trust and love the Lord *despite* discomfort and misfortune and strife?

Let's pray:

Lord God, ... , amen.