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The Third Sunday in Lent

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TEXTS AND TUXEDOS

Last night at evening prayer, Skip Jennings arrived to read the lessons in black tie. I thought to myself, "Well, this raises the bar even at St. John's!" Of course, Skip had an engagement afterward and instead of missing his turn to read, he came in his tuxedo. And he read beautifully.

The recent history of the Daily Office at St. John's originated with Fr. Ralston. His innovation was quite radical at the time, instituting morning and evening prayer along with Holy Communion during Advent and Lent. This liturgical discipline has always been quite special for some in our parish.

Several years ago we added morning and evening prayer, Monday through Friday, throughout the year, and kept the tradition of Holy Communion also in Advent and Lent. Just recently we have invited men in the parish to read lessons during the week.

Reading Holy Scripture in the services of the church provides for a greater understanding and participation in the Word of God. In order to read the lesson properly one must gain some level of understanding. The fact that Holy Scripture is fathomless in meaning and not easy to comprehend, and therefore, not easy to read publicly, requires more effort than simply attending church. It takes clergy years to learn to think about Scripture and to read it well in the services of the church.

And even clergy make mistakes when reading the Scripture, or saying and praying the liturgy. Mistakes in reading happen most often when we allow ourselves to be distracted or preoccupied or simply from fatigue. Sometimes these errors are funny.

I shall never forget biting my tongue one Friday in Lent when William prayed inadvertently for the elimination of all Bishops, Priests, and Deacons. The word in the text of the Litany is illumination, but somehow this got transformed into elimination. There was a long pause. Laughter was imminent.

There was also a time when the pages of the Altar book had been marked wrongly, and for the second collect, instead of the prayer for Lent, I read the prayer for Advent. Of course, I realized this just as I

was finishing it, and so we proceeded, with me somewhat mortified, and Gavin amused.

To tell one more thing on myself. Besides the funny moments there are those which for various reasons affect us more deeply than at other times. Invariably, when I read the passage of Abraham's offering Isaac I am brought to tears. It is not a good policy for the reader to get all teary in the middle of a lesson, but for some reason this tender story affects me this way invariably. Wanting to prepare me each year when this reading came around, William used to ask me if I was ready to read it. He really did not mind my being moved. And I still cannot help it.

Just this past week one of our readers, who is more accustomed to shooting deer than to reading the Scriptures in the service, got all tangled up introducing the lesson. "Here beginneth the fifth chapter of the First Epistle ...here beginneth the sixth verse of the Epistle, oh well, the letter of Paul." After this he read very well.

All of these mistakes and errors happen to the experienced and inexperienced alike. We try our best to avoid them, because the liturgy well done is both glorifying to God and a thing of true beauty. But when these happen they ought not to deter us. They become simply an opportunity to refocus on the matter at hand. With experience many of these things can be overcome, and the reading of the Scriptures publicly a delight.

In the end, what matters is the reading of the text. It is the text and not the competency, or drama, or modulations of the reader's voice that is the main thing. Always the text! The very best reader is the one who conveys the passage and its meaning without the reader being noticed. This is done in the normal voice of the person who reads, projected for the size of the room, yes, but with no amount of affectation.

The text carries itself. Isaiah tells us that the Word of God shall not return void but shall accomplish that which God pleases (Isaiah 55:8-11). And the author of Hebrews writes, "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (4:12). But I love Jeremiah the most, "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully" (23:28).

Thomas Cranmer, the great architect of the Anglican pattern of daily prayer, had this intention. He wanted the Christian citizen to have the opportunity to hear the Scripture read in the context of the church year and in the midst of the prayers each day. The citizenry, he hoped, would visit the parish church each day, with the opportunity to say their prayers on the way to work or before they returned home. If they did so they would hear a great portion of the Bible read, and have their lives filled each day with the Word of God. In this way the church would help build a Christian nation.

Fr. Dunbar and I have offered this possibility to you. It is a comfort to

know, I hope, that the prayers of the Church are being said every day and that you and your family, your church and your nation, are at the heart of prayer at St. John's Church. Those of you who have found these services know what a comfort and blessing daily prayer in the church can be. I have suggested that everyone take one service to begin with, and make it a part of your weekly life. Right now there are about eighty people who come at different times during the week. That is eighty out of about fifteen hundred. I wish there were more.

I can promise you this. If you make this daily prayer a part of your life, you will soon find it essential and indispensable. Those who have begun to read lessons on a regular basis know on an even deeper level how this is so. The mistakes are truly unimportant in the larger picture. And whether the lessons are read in tuxedos or casual clothes, the Word of God goes forth, the prayers are said, and by grace we are lifted to the presence of our heavenly Father.

The Rev'd. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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