

[send this](#)[bookmark](#)[print](#)[close](#)

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.40 No.17

The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Refreshment or
Mothering Sunday) 03/22/09

THE LOGIC OF LENT - 4

On this "Mid-lent" Sunday, we begin to perceive the end of our Lenten pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and the freedom that is ours through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The ancient Old Testament lesson for this day (Exodus 3:1-15) restates the theme of spiritual liberation. God appears to Moses in the burning bush, and announces his plan to "come down to deliver" Israel out of Egyptian slavery, and "to bring them up unto... a land flowing with milk and honey". Like the exorcisms we read about earlier in Lent, it diagnoses the human condition as bondage and exile, an alienation in which we long to return to the spirit's true home, the true and eternal good; and our wandering through the wilderness, through the trials and tribulations of our earthly existence, is a striving to return to the peace and plenty of the promised land, to Jerusalem, city of peace.

The same theme appears in the epistle lesson (Galatians 4:21-31), which in ancient times ended with a clause borrowed from the next verse: "in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free" (5:1a). Since Fr Ralston's time, that clause has been (orally) restored at St. John's, in its place in the next full sentence: "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty, where-with Christ hath made you free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage". To make his point, Saint Paul draws an elaborate allegorical comparison. On the one side there is Ishmael, Abraham's son "according to the flesh" by the bondswoman Hagar. He stands for the covenant of the Law given at Sinai, and "answereth to Jerusalem which now is, which is in bondage with her children". On the other side is Isaac, Abraham's son "born by promise" to the freewoman Sarah. He stands for the new covenant of grace, and for the freedom of "Jerusalem which is above...the mother of us all". "We are not children of the bondswoman," concludes St. Paul, "but of the free".

The point Saint Paul is making by this allegory, is that spiritual freedom is not found by doing the works of the Law. The attempt to do so, in the power of fallen human nature ("the flesh"), is futile, and only results in deepening our just condemnation for our sins, rather than liberating us from them. Spiritual freedom – freedom from sin, from the burden and curse of the Law, from death, hell and Satan's power – is found through faith in the promises of grace made in the Word of God and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And faith itself is the free gift of God's grace, given to those who are "born of the Spirit". The promise of the

gospel is wonderfully summed up in the aspiration of today's collect, "that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished" (as the Law reveals) "by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved."

The spiritual liberty which has been the subject of our Lenten exercises and meditations is the free gift of God's grace in Christ, and can be sustained only in dependence upon that grace, by faith in the promises set forth in the Word of God, a theme of illustrated in the gospel lesson (John 6:1-14). A multitude, hungry to hear the Word God, has followed Jesus out into the wilderness, at the time when faithful Israelites are in pilgrimage up to Jerusalem to keep the Passover, the memorial of the Exodus. In the midst of want, by virtue of his word of thanksgiving, a few loaves and fishes are wonderfully multiplied, and what was far too little becomes much more than enough. From the store of "the fragments that remain", collected by the twelve apostles in twelve baskets - that is to say, from the apostolic witness to the life-giving bread of heaven, the word of truth, the apostles will have more enough to nourish all God's people in this world's wilderness, on their way up to Jerusalem (whence the name "Refreshment" Sunday). Jesus thus appears as a new and greater Moses, "the prophet that should come into the world", the Mediator of the new and eternal covenant, the one to sustain us by his Word in the spiritual freedom of the heavenly Jerusalem.

As throughout Lent, these lessons have a specific practical application: that while feeding our bodies with "barley loaves and a few small fishes", we should refresh our souls with the banquet of God's word, and the prayer which claims his promises of grace.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

[send this](#)

[bookmark](#)

[print](#)

[close](#)

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.