

Isaiah 64:1-9

I Corinthians 1:3-9

Mark 13:24-37

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

As we begin our new church year this morning, I have chosen to set us off on our annual journey through scripture and celebration by beginning with the Great Litany, or at least the first portion of it. In this historic prayer we ask God for deliverance from our current condition and from those things which threaten our faithful lives. So, what better way to begin anew, as the fresh start of a new liturgical year dawns, as our relationship with God stretches out before us in ways we cannot begin to predict? So, what better way than first to turn to Almighty God with our request for blessings, wearing our hopes and dreams on our sleeves, with a lump in our throats, and with hearts pounding with hopeful anticipation? What better way? It is the Advent, after all, of the Incarnation experience, when our timeless God is known to walk with us in Christ Jesus, intimately involved in the lives we lead and the sacramental worship we profess.

In the 1540s, when the English king Henry's arguments with the Roman Pope presented an opportunity for religious reform, Thomas Cranmer compiled and reworked an ancient prayer form into what we now call the Great Litany. And, for the first time, there was a published liturgy in the English language! Cranmer was an Oxford professor and trusted advisor to the king, and was named Archbishop of Canterbury, so he had the authority to instruct all churches in England to pray or sing this prayer. Sadly, during the five-year reign of Henry's daughter, Mary, he was burned at the stake along with some 300 other reformers for the work he had completed. But when Elizabeth was crowned, this Litany and other English language liturgies were restored, and find their American home in our Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. Were we together in our church building this morning, I would probably have chanted the Litany as the choir and I processed down the center aisle, and maybe you can picture that in your mind. But, more importantly, we can take the opportunity of the Great Litany to lead us in a reflection about ourselves and our world, and how we hope God will take up our cause in the coming year. In the portion we prayed today, we specifically ask God for deliverance, and may I suggest the following additions for our reflection on this First Sunday of Advent:

Deliverance from superstition. Many of you are familiar with the old parody on the Great litany which goes like this "From ghosties and Ghoulies and long-leggedy beasties, and from things which go bump in the night...good Lord deliver us!" The superstitions which derive from fear are perhaps expected, but are, in reality, not very helpful. Even in Jesus' day, we are told, there were any number of traveling magicians and sorcerers who, for some compensation, would provide a remedy for fear. The contrast is made, though, between superstitious charlatans and the teachings of Christ that love is the power which can ultimately defeat fear. Sadly but predictably, religious history, and even theology I think, is littered with the refuse of superstitious misunderstanding, no matter how well-intentioned. In our own day, we often find ourselves walking a fine line, I think, between faith in God's loving intervention and the possibility that we, somehow, can invoke powers to do our own will by incantation or idolatry. Fear is real. But the appropriate remedy for fear is generally beyond us, and lies in the wisdom of God's Holy Spirit. Therefore we pray, good Lord deliver us.

From self-deprecation. When we forget that God loves us, we can forget that we have worth beyond ourselves. Just because we are regularly unable to achieve that which we think desirable, or don't exhibit those physical or emotional traits which we think are attractive, doesn't mean that we are not entirely loved

by God, as a parent has unconditional love for a child. Those who do not know this, and don't live with this knowledge in daily life, may easily slip into the rabbit-hole of feeling worthless, hopeless, and disappointed. Dear friends, God has made us each sacramentally unique, and we should feel honored and adored. Though the powers of this world, for their own advantage, may try to extinguish it, there is a spark of holiness in each person. Find it, delight in it, protect it from the winds of random disregard, and help it grow into a flame which warms and illuminates. And know that your love is distinctly valuable and desperately needed by those around you. From all feelings of worthlessness in this coming year, good Lord deliver us.

From the pre-existing condition of racism in our hearts and in our nation. From all that would insidiously seek to diminish our core value that all persons are created equal, and undermine our core code that all should have equal access and opportunity in the society we keep. Racism is an evil from which we long to be freed, and we look to God for strength as we deliberately and purposefully strain against its confining chains. It is a sinister evil which deprives our nation of its fullest measure, and dampens the flame of good leadership. As we become aware of God's love for us, let us not forget that God loves each, and commands that we love each other as God has loved us. From all racist thought and action in this coming year, good Lord deliver us.

From the Covid virus, and from the insidious ways it is infecting our relationships as well as our bodies. Have you noticed how our conversations now seem to be prefaced by some need for personal justification? How we begin by saying something like "Well, I assure you that I have been careful, that I have stayed away from everyone as much as possible, that I have worn my mask, that I have quarantined myself just in case" ? Is this evidence of growing mistrust, even among close friends and relatives? Are we becoming skeptical of each other's personal judgment? Must we each feel compelled to over-explain our personal behaviors? And what sort of damage can such a perceived need do to our trusted relationships? From all mistrust of others, and from the need to justify ourselves, good Lord deliver us.

From accelerated and unreflective lifestyles. For many, the pandemic has seemed to throw life into a frenzy of compensatory activity. We need reassurance, we need to figure out how to adapt to the conditions, we need to keep moving desperately in order not to succumb. We scoff at the value of setting aside time for reflection and ordered thought, for prayer and meditation, for reading a good book or even "*The Good Book*". There is so much to do and too little time in the day, so much to urgently do before the apocalypse a pandemic might cause. We thoughtlessly dismiss everyday blessings and joys, as if they might be a distraction. Yet, ironically, it may be that very reflective lifestyle which saves our souls from a fear of impending doom. It may be that approaching our lives prayerfully in all we encounter and endure is, in fact, the most efficacious cure of all. From all frantic fear in our daily activity, good Lord deliver us.

Dear friends, it is a good use of our Advent time to thoughtfully consider from just what things the continual coming of Christ might deliver us. Or rather, how Christ's leadership can guide us to achieve deliverance together. Personally, I have quite a list already...I could go on all day! Deliverance from tick bites, for example, or addiction, or unintended consequences, or political corruption. Make your own list, your own litany. As much as Archbishop Cranmer tried to consolidate all our needs into his universal prayer, there are always specific requests and petitions, specific to person and time and place. Consider what the Incarnation can mean to you personally, how its energized hub can radiate outward through sacred spokes to the place where your own rubber meets the road. Make your request without shame or hesitation, and complete your prayer with reassurance, saying "O, Christ, hear us". Amen.