

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

Then, says the psalmist, were we like those who dream. We dream of wholeness, of lives that matter, of fulfilling relationships, of families who care. Then, when our fortunes are restored, our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy. For we saw forgiveness on the horizon, we were stirred by the promise of a new life to make commitments and promises of our own. Oh, too long have we been separated by opinion and judgment, too long have we been separated by preference and tradition; may we please now be reconciled by common interest and by common prayer?! Our common experience of Lent bids us to authentically rehearse just what it is that inspires us to be passionate and compassionate representatives of Christ in this world we are called to serve. We are, as St. Paul insists, to be Christ's Body in the world, the world of Oneida, the world of the Americas, and the wider world of the seven continents, the Body of Christ which extends to all the people of creation, that all may know God and be in constant, prayerful dialogue with the divine.

This week will conclude our season of Lent, with next Sunday being Palm Sunday, which has a disturbing paradox all its own. From then until Easter Sunday are the days of Holy Week, when we disciples dare to walk in the footsteps of Jesus during those last fateful days, trying to faithfully accompany him as he completes his remarkable and lonely journey. During Lent we are called to pick up the timeless mirror and reflect on our own achievements and flaws. Am I being a faithful follower of Christ? Am I being the disciple I wish to be? In all honesty, have I even begun to make a difference? Looking in the mirror, do I see a face which reflects the countenance of Christ? In Lent, we members of the church hold the mirror back a ways, so that in broader view we might see ourselves as a group. We consider our achievements and flaws as a church, as a faith community, as a Christian dispensation, as the Body of Christ together. We wonder if our hearts and minds are in the right place to continue the work of Jesus. We wonder a lot.

So, how do our Bible readings help us in our wondering? Well, they remind us that whatever we value as accomplishments from our past may not lead us to salvation, to wholeness, to the way we are intended to be. The prophet Isaiah tells us 'Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old'. Whatever we see in the Lenten mirror may change completely with tomorrow's sunrise. Time waits for no one; Life is unpredictable. Our flaws are stubborn and persistent; it is highly unlikely that we, left to our own designs, will be able to change even one hair, one mole, or one wrinkle. And turning the mirror back and forth to see all the church around, with, and behind us only confirms the truth that even on our best days we would not be mistaken for a vision of the Christ. We gather here in this place, while across the globe other Christians do the same, and we all make vows to do our best to be the presence of Christ in this world. Yet we fear that there is less and less to show for our commitment. Are we too flawed to carry on Jesus' ministry? Are we too proud to stop and ask directions? Are we too reluctant to seek God's help?

Speaking with the prophetic voice of God, Isaiah goes on to say, 'I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?' God, our help in ages past, and our hope for years to come, has not left us here alone. Rest assured, dear people of God, the Lord has not abandoned us, but daily creates all things new, whether we deserve it or not. As Bishop Skip once said to me, when I was discouraged at my own unworthiness, 'Of course you're not worthy, Nick...I am not worthy either, and I'm your bishop, for heaven's sake! It is God who makes us worthy, Nick, not we ourselves.' Though it is vital that we be truthful and evaluate ourselves with honest investigation, it is also vital that we remember what Isaiah reports: that even when we are most thirsty, God gives us 'water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.' God is the answer to the bleakness of Lent. Have you discovered during this Lenten season that it is too laborious to incline your heart to keep the Commandments, or that you do not really love your neighbor as yourself? Has it saddened you? Take heart, for 'those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy, and those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.'

It is the work of the church to go out carrying the seed. And though we are saddened, saddened often to

the point of weeping, for fear we might not be worthy of our cause, not strong enough to fulfill our baptismal vows, incapable of properly planting and cultivating the blessings which God has entrusted to us, yet with God's fertile help those blessings grow and are harvested for the benefit of those who hunger after righteousness and justice. Yes, the church is flawed. We are not the perfect, unblemished Body of Christ. But we want to be. Worldwide, the Christian community, push comes to shove, must confess that the body we wear is corrupted by very human flaws. But, better to confess than ignore. Better to re-dedicate, even over and over again, than to let the seed go unplanted. Better to love, however imperfectly, than to be indifferent. Lent can be a critical season for the church, when, rather than lord it over its devoted members and find judgment against them, it takes the time for its own self-reflection, that it may be re-dedicated to Christ's purpose, and perhaps even be exorcised of its own subtle demons.

Today's Gospel narrative finds Jesus back in the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany, at the home of his friend and benefactor Lazarus, whom Jesus has recently and miraculously raised from the dead at the insistence of the sisters Martha and Mary. There is going to be a dinner party, but not like those meals where Jesus ate with tax collectors and reprobates; gathered here are the devoted followers, the disciples, the men and women who trust and love the Lord. Here, too, is the notorious Judas, who, hypocritically, is quick to find fault with the others. Assembled around Jesus is the embryonic church, those who will, in the coming days, become the founding mothers and fathers of the Christian Church. And Jesus finds the opportunity for a 'teaching moment', an opportunity to give advice to his loyal band.

Martha is scurrying around to make the home as hospitable as she can: she is preparing the meal, sweeping the floors, arranging the chairs at the table, setting out plates and jugs and all manner of decorative adornments to turn the meal into a proper banquet. Meanwhile, her sister, Mary, is distracted by the presence of the Lord. She does not help Martha with the housework and preparation, but rather anoints Jesus' feet with an expensive oil, wiping it in with her own hair with intimate devotion. She is swooning at the overwhelming presence of Jesus, and is oblivious to the needs around her. Judas remarks that she has no regard for the poor, since she has spent so much on this one act of love. Of course, the narrative reveals that Judas himself is corrupt and has no business indicting Mary at all. I wonder, was the early, embryonic church, for whom this Gospel lesson was written, likewise threatened with corruption and hypocrisy?

Martha becomes exasperated with Mary's distraction, for isn't it the task of Jesus' followers to serve self-sacrificially, not counting the cost or the tedium of the work? This ought, thinks Martha, to be the calling of the disciples, to serve the master and his world at every opportunity, no matter how menial the task? But Mary has other things on her mind. Her discipleship is centered less on service and more on adoration. When asked for a moment of leadership, decision, and judgement, Jesus seems to side with Mary. But notice that he doesn't discourage Martha from her calling, either. Both are worthy of Christian ministry: the servant and the contemplative, the scurrer and the swooner. The church, even in this early form, includes all manner of devoted followers, with all manner of gifts and callings. The Body of Christ has multiple members with multiple talents and passions, all the better to embrace you with. In the face of criticism against Mary, Jesus reminds us that she has a choice, too, and that she has honestly chosen the form of her ministry. As the church has grown and diversified, we ought to find that all manner of gifts are useful in our life of faith together.

So, our church is enriched by the variety of gifts and callings brought to her by her members. If, in your Lenten exploration, you have found that you are unsure of your worthiness because of some deficiency, be assured that God will make you worthy, perhaps with a different gift embedded deep within your image of God. Lent helps us explore those hidden regions, that we might flourish as the vital members of Christ's Body which we are. The church, in its wisdom, sets aside this time each year for such exploration, with the prayer that we may corporately grow by such common experience. It may seem to be an arbitrary imposition, designed to transform us by guilt and shame, which each year humiliates us and keeps us in line with the church liturgy and law. But it really is a time for us to honestly consider our efficacy as the active and saving Body of Christ in the world we are called to serve, God help us. And God, we trust, does. Bless you, dear friends, for enduring this holy season with me, and thank you for permitting God to work through us for the mission of the church. Amen