

“THEY that put their trust in the Lord shall be even as the mount Sion, which may not be removed, but standeth fast for ever.” (Psalm 125.1)

As I mention in the bulletin column, this Sunday is a day known by many names. Some call it *mid-Lent Sunday*, because this is the halfway point on our journey to Easter. Some call it *Refreshment Sunday*, because on Mid-Lent Sunday, you got to breathe a bit from the strictness of Lent, and relax from the rules a bit. It is also called *Laetare Sunday*, so named because of the opening words of the Medieval introit, “Laetare Hierusalem” or “Rejoice ye with Jerusalem” – from Isaiah 66. All of these names have a common theme: rejoicing in the middle of this season of penitence. From all this rejoicing, some traditions came to exist: the wearing of Rose coloured vestments instead of violet, for example, or the eating of desserts, which was otherwise frowned upon during Lent. There was another tradition which existed on this Sunday, as well, one that became known in the British Isles as “Mothering Sunday”. This Sunday gets its name from the Epistle for this morning, from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where he refers to the Jerusalem that is above – the heavenly Jerusalem – as the mother of us all. Regardless of what name you call it, or which traditions you follow, one thing that is in common are our readings which take on a remarkably different tone than we’ve had for the last few weeks.

We have been following for the last three weeks a theme of sin and evil and how to deal with temptations. Now, we pivot. This week, we hear about the reassurance we get from placing our trust in God, and rather than be warned once again about the dangers of evil, our attention is drawn beyond the cross to the love, hope, and joy we share in the kingdom of God. But trust and hope are the key themes we encounter today.

We begin in the wilderness (Exodus 16). The people of Israel have recently been freed from Egypt by the Lord through the Red Sea. And already, they are grumbling at the situation they’re in. Some say they’d rather be dead, or be back in Egypt as they were happier as slaves than they are now (v. 3). Why did we listen to Moses and follow him? Things were going decently in Egypt, many were saying. Though they were directing their complaints at Moses and Aaron, Moses acknowledges that these complaints were ultimately pointed to God. He encourages the people to have some faith and thanks that the Lord had delivered them from slavery. But the people were hungry and unsatisfied. In his goodness, the Lord tells Moses to instruct the people about the new food that He was to provide for them. Every morning except the Sabbath, a bread-like substance was to appear on the ground and the people were to collect only what they needed. If they tried to hoard it, it would spoil and produce worms. The exception was the day before the Sabbath, when they would each gather a double portion to take care of that day, and allow them to rest and not work. The Lord also provided them quail in the evenings.

Of course, the people were hesitant about this arrangement. Some collected more than was needed, and some tried to collect on Saturdays. But what the Lord said proved to be true. They could not keep the manna, and none came on the Sabbath. The Lord issued the people a test, for this arrangement required them to rely completely on Him: to trust that He would provide as he said he would.

A sequel, of sorts, takes place in John chapter 6. Here we have the feeding of the five thousand, or as some scholars point out: possibly as many as 20,000 if you include the women and children in the count. Regardless of the number, the miracle is the feeling of a *lot* of people with a measly five loaves and two fish. Once again, we are told that Jesus was *testing* his disciple Philip: “where are we to buy bread, so these people may eat?” (John 6.5). He encouraged, or perhaps forced, the disciples to trust in his provision of enough food to feed such a vast number of mouths. While the conclusion of our reading proclaims Jesus as a prophet, later in the chapter Jesus assumes a much more important title than that. When talking about the Manna that the Israelites ate, Jesus says there is a much better food for his followers to eat than that heavenly bread. “I am

the bread of life" (John 6.35), Jesus says to them. I will be the one to fill you, for I am the new bread from heaven that never leaves you hungry or thirsty for more. Jesus fills us with the hope of our everlasting life in him. He nourishes our bodies and our souls that we may be fed by the Spirit of God.

Last week we read the story of Jesus casting out demons and the danger of the now-clean and swept space being at risk of a greater invasion unless they are protected. Now this week we hear of that ultimate protection: that we must fill ourselves with the new bread of heaven. In a sense, this seems to be metaphorical only. But in reality, we are mere minutes away from partaking in Jesus by physically eating the Bread of Life in the Holy Eucharist, of which our Lord says, "This is my body" and "this is my blood". So not only are we called to fill ourselves spiritually with God's food, but also we are called to physically partake in this most sacred meal so we may physically be filled by him as well. We are called to place our trust in the Lord's provision, that we may confidently in the gift of himself which is our promise to attain everlasting life.

Taking this knowledge of the gift of the bread of life with us, let us then look at our Epistle. St. Paul is here encouraging the Galatian church to be steadfast in what he has already taught them: specifically that they do not require to take on the customs and marks of the Old Covenant: the Law. He tells the Galatians (and, by extension, all Gentiles) that to belong to Christ is different than the requirements of the Law because there are no prerequisites for participation, they only need to accept the grace that God has given them. This is, then, a cause to rejoice. Unlike the bounds of the Old Covenant which can be compared to a type of slavery, Paul says that the New Covenant – with its spiritual home in the *new*, heavenly Jerusalem – is free through the payment of Christ's blood. Here once again we are reminded that we are children of a promise: just like how Isaac was promised to Sarah in her old age. We are children of a promise, and so must place our trust in God who rightfully deserves it, just like how the people had to trust in the manna, and the disciples trust in the bread. We have the ultimate assurance that God's intentions are true and he will follow through.

As a concluding thought, I would like to share from a sermon by Fr. Robert Crouse that summarizes the themes of today. "*These several names [mothering Sunday, Refreshment Sunday, etc] reflect one basic thought: the homeward journey of our souls is sustained and nourished by the Word of God in Christ, by that Providence which keeps alive within us the vision of Jerusalem, the City of our freedom, our native land of pure and perfect good. That is the bread which sustains us in the wilderness, and nothing less will ever satisfy the restless heart. St. Paul speaks of the heavenly Jerusalem as "the mother of us all". Our mothers give us birth, and nourish us, and guide our steps. So does the heavenly Jerusalem, the Providence of God, give birth to our spirit's life, and nourish it, and guide its upward way. It is the office of the Church on earth to be an outpost of that true Jerusalem, the free city of the spirit. That is what the word Parish means—a colony, or outpost—and thus, the Church's task is mothering, with word and sacrament, with discipline and teaching; rebuking and casting out our demons, certainly, but also nourishing our souls with the vision of a higher - and freer life. That is bread in the wilderness, the daily rations for our journey, and the ground of our rejoicing.*"

So, may we take the time today, in the midst of this season of penitence, to rejoice in what we have in Jesus Christ. And may this rejoicing uplift us and empower us as we continue our journey towards Holy Week and Easter. We have been given a glimpse of the hope and joy that awaits us as members of the Body of Christ if we trust in him and eat his bread which he freely gives. On this day, as our mouths are nourished with sweet foods and our hearts nourished by maternal love, let us eat that heavenly nourishment that enlivens our souls and cause us to rejoice with the heavenly Jerusalem.