

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

THE COLLECT

GRANT, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

COMMENTARY

The Gospel, Epistle and Collect for this Sunday, the mid-point in Lent, are a threefold cord. The Epistle spiritualises the Gospel; the Collect takes it up as spiritualised and turns it into a prayer.

The Gospel provides the account of the feeding of the 5,000—thus the ancient title for the day, *Dominica Refectionis*, Refreshment Sunday. This miracle of providing bodily sustenance and physical healing to weary souls may be seen as a fulfilment of the promise of Jesus: ‘Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you’ (Matthew 11:28). The bodily refreshment is symbolic of our higher refreshment by his grace.

The Epistle describes another kind of weariness, that of guilt under the Law of God, which Christ also relieves. There are two covenants, that of the Law and that established

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in and by Christ. The terms of the covenant of the Law are, 'The man that doeth the works of the law shall live' but none of us can fulfil it! In contrast, the terms of the new covenant are, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (who fulfils the Law and bears its curse) and you shall be saved'. So there is comfort and refreshment for the guilt-laden soul in union with Jesus Christ and in membership of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Mother of those who believe the gospel (so this day is also called Mothering Sunday—'Jerusalem above is free and is the mother of us all' (Galatians 4:26)).

The Collect begins by recognising that before God's court, we all stand condemned as those who both break his commandments and fail to obey them; thus in our consciences we know that we deserve his punishment (as the Covenant of the Law clearly states). But it does not stop there. It prays that by the comfort of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be relieved or refreshed (here we hear the invitation—'Come unto me all that travail...').

This is a perfect Collect for mid-Lent if we have been taking Lent seriously and are much aware of our sins though self-examination and penitence.

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The modern transformation of this day in Great Britain into the celebration of human motherhood, as Mother's Day (or Mothers' Day), has occurred in the Church because Lent is not being taken seriously!

When Lent is taken seriously, then this Sunday is a day when the Church encamps in a green pasture to be relieved, refreshed and fed by the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we may serve his Father not only in the rest of Lent, on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, but also in Easter power and grace unto our life's end.

Below is a seventeenth-century description of a Lent taken seriously:

'To Keep A True Lent' by Robert Herrick
Is this a fast, to keep The larder lean, And
clean, From fat of veals and sheep?
Is it to quit the dish Of flesh, yet still To fill
The platter high with fish?
Is it to fast an hour, Or ragged to go, Or show
A downcast look, and sour?
No; 'tis a fast to dole Thy sheaf of wheat And
meat Unto the hungry soul.
It is to fast from strife, From old debate, And
hate; To circumcise thy life;
To show a heart grief-rent; To starve thy sin,
Not bin, And that's to keep thy Lent.

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THE EPISTLE. Gal. 4. 21-31

TELL me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bond-maid, the other by a free-woman. But he who was of the bond-woman was born after the flesh; but he of the free-woman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free; which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit; even so it is now. Nevertheless, what saith the Scripture? Cast out the bond-woman and her son; for the son of the bond-woman shall not be heir with the son of the free-woman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bond-woman, but of the free.

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THE GOSPEL. S. John. 6. 1-14

JESUS went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased. And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his disciples. And the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh. When Jesus then lift up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? (And this he said to prove him; for he himself knew what he would do.) Philip answered him, Two hundred penny-worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little. One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him, There is a lad here, which hath five barley-loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many? And Jesus said, Make the men sit down. Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would. When they were filled, he said unto his

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disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. Therefore they gathered them together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley-loaves, which remained over and above unto them that had eaten. Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that Prophet that should come into the world.

Commentary by the Revd. Dr. Peter Toon.

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