

St. Martin's Church, Williamsburg, Virginia  
March 13, 2016 Lent 5  
The Reverend Dr. Kathleen V. Price, Priest in Charge

Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3: 8-14; John 12: 1-8

This is the last Sunday of Lent.

I cannot impose a Lenten discipline upon you...you must do that to and for yourself.

However, I have been encouraging you to review your promises to yourself and to God.

You know about your *unruly wills and affections*.

Lent gives us a thoughtful time to begin to recognize who can bring order out of the chaos of our lives...That begins with love in our hearts which is fixed not on ourselves, but on God.

In the wilderness of Lent, God is about to do a new thing...make a way in the desert that our parched lives and thirsty souls might become all that God intends for us to be.

And this morning we are back in this beautiful worship space for the first time in many long months.

I joined you just two months ago - and when I came,  
I told you that I would not change anything  
without telling you why.

There are at least two things different this morning that  
I was told would cause some consternation.

The magnificent cross over the altar is missing! I know!  
I asked that we save that last piece of restoration  
until Easter - a visible symbol that the cross,  
and the tomb, are empty!

And the font is not where it used to be. I know.

Theologically, in the Episcopal Church, the primary worship  
is in the Holy Eucharist - in the center.

I grew up in the Baptist Church where the central focus is  
the pulpit and the Baptistry - in the center.

For us, we celebrate the Eucharist, supplemented and strengthened  
by the preaching, on my right, and by baptism, on my left.

Placing the font in front of the altar can diminish the impact of the Eucharist!

Practically speaking, the location of the font  
 inside the sanctuary, elevated, makes it easier for you to see when  
 the baptism is taking place!  
 We will see how well that works next Saturday at the Easter Vigil!

Now that you can rest easy, I know some of you have some "issues" with Paul,  
 but I'd like to tell you about the setting for  
 the letter to the Philippians.

The middle of the sixth decade of the first century was an interesting time  
 in the history of the Roman Empire.

The Emperor Claudius had reigned for almost a decade; somewhat of a relief we can be certain,  
 in that his reign followed that of his rather brutish nephew, Gaius Caesar Germanicus,  
 better known as Caligula.

In fifty-four AD Claudius was given poisoned mushrooms by his fifth wife Agrippina,  
 making way for her son Nero to become the next ruler of Rome.

And we think politics is rough today!

When Claudius was deified by the Senate, a few weeks later  
 (a common honour for a departed emperor), Nero was quoted as saying that  
 "mushrooms must be a food favoured by the Gods...since by eating them  
 (his step-father) Claudius has become one."

In this very year, fifty-four AD, St. Paul was imprisoned by the Praetorian guard  
 of the imperial army.

We do not know exactly where Paul was held in prison.

It may have been either in Caesarea or in Rome itself.

It was at this time that he wrote the correspondence to the Philippians,  
 a portion of which we heard read this morning.

It would be hard for Paul to imagine that all these centuries later it is his words that  
 we are reading and not those of the major figures of his day.

It would be equally astounding to the vain Nero to think of an executed carpenter  
 and a tent maker from Tarsus changing the course of history.

One of the traditional themes of Lent is that of sacrifice.

Lent is a time when we give up something that we enjoy or take something on  
 that will bring us closer to God... a symbol of sacrifice to be a daily reminder of  
 the sacrifice of our Lord, for which the season of Lent  
 is a preparation.

St. Paul knew sacrifice in his own life.

He had given things up, in order to prepare for his life in Christ.

As he sat in the prison of Nero, looking back over his life,  
 he had given up the religion of his youth, his friends and family, his health, his freedom,  
 and was very soon to give up his life.

And he tells us he considered it a bargain!

*"More than that, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing  
 Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things,  
 and I count them as rubbish,, in order that I may gain Christ and  
 be found in him."*

Paul had come to experience clearly God's great love toward us.

This is the major theme in today's lessons...

God's steadfast love is worth all the world to us.

Nothing is of greater value. Nothing.

We can accept the relationship God is offering or we can reject it, but  
 we have no power to control, change or destroy it.

I knew a friend's son who was a bright and promising student  
 at MIT – Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a prestigious school, difficult to get into  
 in the 70's, perhaps now as well.

Duncan had a sure and certain plan for his life in science and technology, far from his  
 Presbyterian roots.

He was living the probably typical life of a college student, away from home, on his own,  
 trying everything ... somewhat like the prodigal son.

In his junior year, he was diagnosed with MS – Multiple Sclerosis.

By his senior year, it had advanced to the point at which he had to use a wheelchair –  
 on a campus that was handicapped in-accessible.

With the help of his friends, who carried him up and down stairs, he graduated.

He came home to Williamsburg to confront how he would spend the rest of his life,  
 severely challenged.

A few years later, he went to Seminary (which was made handicap accessible for the first time),  
 was ordained, took a call as a chaplain in a Retirement Community in Texas and  
 where he lived until his death.

Duncan always said that he would not trade the loss of the use of his legs, and later his arms, for his walk with Jesus.

In the face of tragedy, he turned to God for strength and support.

He knew, for him, his faith came with a high cost, but he was able to see his loss as gain.

Nothing is greater than the love of God.

When we fail to care for the helpless, the homeless and the hungry,  
even those we cannot see in some remote corner of the world...  
we are rejecting Christ.

When we fail to live in love and charity with one another, gossiping, manipulating,  
treating others as we ourselves would not wish to be treated,  
we are driving nails into the body of Christ.

The events of this coming Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday, is more than about the people of Jesus' day.

It is about those of us who have gathered here this morning.

God has remained as steadfast in love, as we have in unfaithfulness.

When we reject God's grace...the nature of God is not changed, broken, lessened, cheapened,  
or made less effective.

Grace remains for those who seek it, for those who even seek to turn from their sin to receive it.

And as last week's parable, of the lost and prodigal son, taught us...  
those who return to God are treated by God as if they had never left.

That is how great and unbounded and steadfast is the love of God.

In today's Gospel lesson, Mary took a jar of costly perfume and  
anointed Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair.

This is a touching and very intimate gesture, except to Judas.

Judas was the keeper of the purse, the treasurer, and he resented what he thought was a waste.

Presumably he wanted the money used for the poor.

He was keeping a share of the treasures for himself, and did not want to lose his share.

Mary seemed to perceive the events that were about to take place and she was  
anointing Jesus with nard, the oil for burial.

Jesus died for us, promising us eternal life. We were saved from sin when Jesus died.

What God did for us then... God is seeking to do for us now.

This Lent is but another gracious opportunity for us to see it, and accept it.

We are not here to remembering past events...we are a part of God's event here and now.

This is what the latter Isaiah sought to reveal to his people.

*"Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.*

*I am about to do a new thing...do you not perceive it?...*

*I will make a path in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink  
to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself..."*

Lent, culminating in Holy Week, is an invitation to accept and drink from  
the river of God's love.

The love that nourished Isaiah and his people...the steadfastness that for all time demonstrated  
its power over our darkness and hatred, by forgiving us even from the cross.

Will we reject God's love and have it pass surely to others?

Or, like St. Paul, will the love of God become our greatest possession?

*"More than that, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing  
Christ Jesus my Lord."*

What did you give up this Lent to know Christ? To be found by him?

What do you need to forget? A past injustice? A past hurt? A past betrayal?

How are you straining to get to what lies ahead –

the peace of Christ that passes all understanding?

Will you count the cost or

will you respond in faith in order to win the heavenly prize?

Look out – God is about to do a new thing!

There is Good Friday... There's also Easter!

Those who have walked in darkness will see a great Light!

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will see God!

Pray that we may respond fully to love and grace of God in Christ.

Look out – God is about to do a new thing!

In Jesus...in me...in you!

This morning we give thanks for our parish space from which we are called to share the Gospel.

Let the people say Amen!