

Sermon: 19th Sunday after Pentecost: September 21, 2008

Exodus 16:2-15; Psalm 105:1-6; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Introduction

“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those things that shall endure...”

Dateline: Islamabad, and Wall Street

We have been at war with Islamic extremism for seven long years. Again yesterday, terrorism raised its ugly head again yesterday in Pakistan, in Islamabad. The attack was aimed again at a quintessentially American hotel chain, the Marriott. This places fear in the hearts of the people and government of Pakistan and reminds us again that al Qaida remains a force of grave concern to our country and to the world.

Earlier this week, an attack also attributed to al Qaida targeted our U.S. Embassy in Yemen. Innocent people died in both these attacks. Many were critically or seriously injured. Both events are tied to American interests.

The near absolute collapse of Wall Street this week sent shudders through domestic and international markets and shakes confidence in financial structures—confidence being the single most important value on which financial markets either thrive or die. We have just witnessed the single largest financial bailout in US history by Paulson, our US Treasury Secretary, to prevent a Depression worse than that of the 1930's. (\$700 Billion). Although we can breathe a relative sigh of relief since Friday, the reality of such a drastic intervention points up our need to take stock (no pun intended) of the way we lead our lives, as members of the American society and as individuals.

“Grant us, O Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things...”

Pragmatic Christianity

This prayer is important today and every day. It's just particularly poignant at this time when time is of the essence in re-establishing confidence in and among financial institutions and when we are less than two months from electing a new U.S. President and myriad other officials, at all levels of government. It is a time when we need to pray and pay attention more than ever, as good stewards and citizens, to the public square. Asking God to help us not be anxious about earthly things does not translate "put our heads into the sand." Asking God to help us not be anxious about earthly things *is* asking God to help us put our wants and needs into perspective and look out for the common good.

"Heaven Help Us All"

I cannot resist quoting a subtitle in a headline in this weekend's *Wall Street Journal*: "Heaven Help Us All." The context was when Paulson and Ben Bernanke, Chairman of the Federal Reserve, sped to Congress to seek approval for the bailout. "If it doesn't pass, then heaven help us all," Mr. Paulson is quoted as saying.

The Hebrew people, in our lesson from Exodus, would understand this appeal, "Heaven help us all." They wouldn't know anything of our type of sophisticated financial distress, but they well knew the distress of being hungry, tired and discouraged as they moved around the wilderness, lost in their own misery. Providentially, the people's cry was heard, and manna rained from heaven to feed them in the morning and quail was sent their way at twilight.

"Like manna from heaven" has become a common phrase in our culture to depict anything that miraculously supplies resources to alleviate a problem. Do not be surprised if we hear someone speak of the federal bailout as something "like manna from heaven," whether you agree with that or not. Clearly the story in Exodus focuses upon God's response to the children of Israel. I am *NOT* suggesting a parallel between Paulson and Yahweh. I *am* suggesting that "manna," a fine flaky substance which gave sustenance to the Hebrew people, symbolically points us to the bread we share as Christians in the Eucharist—our thanksgiving for all that God provides us, at all times.

G. P. Palestrina (1525-1594)

Panis Angelicus, which we will hear at the Offertory today, is one of the most famous and most beautiful melodies and moving texts of our Christian life. Translated "Bread of Angels," it reads: "The bread of angels becomes the bread of men, the heavenly bread gives an end to earthly forms. O marvelous and wondrous sacrament: a poor man, a slave, and the humble one all partake of the Lord."

"Bread of angels" imagery is directly related to that of "manna from heaven." Palestrina's music speaks to us spiritually now, just as it did during the tumultuous 16th century, the century in which the Church of England was painfully, but successfully, birthed by Queen Elizabeth the First. Palestrina, a conservative Catholic in Italy, had no part in all that of course!

Those who hunger for God receive God. Manna is the physical symbol of the spiritual connection between God and God' people, as the Eucharistic bread and wine we receive at the celebration of the Eucharist--the Mass-- is an intimate spiritual experience of communion with God. Thinking of our Collect again today, I would say that our communion experience is, indeed, a "heavenly" one which feeds our souls.

Matthew

"...but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last [ones] worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." This murmuring of the laborers against the landowner for being as generous to those who have worked fewer hours as they, although understandable at a human level, is offensive to God. Matthew is quick to draw a sharp retort to the grumbling, wining laborers in the vineyard and remind them—us—that God's generosity surpasses man-made rules

or ideas of equity. God's ways are different than that of humanity, as the Psalmist reminds us frequently.

Kingdom of Heaven

It is not up to us to judge God---portrayed symbolically as the Landowner in the parable of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is not up to us to decide who's in and who's out of the "Kingdom of Heaven." It's not up to us to say anything else about someone else's worthiness before God. It *is* up to us to do everything we can to be straight with God and in harmony with our neighbor. That is the essence of being true to our Baptismal Covenant, a covenant which binds us to our Lord in an intimate relationship.

Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure...

Hold fast to those [things] what shall endure

What better advice, spiritually (and financially) is there than that? Hold fast to that which will endure. Faith endures. It is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Heb. 11:1). Love endures. God's love is the foundation of all that is, seen and unseen. As laborers in God's vineyard, we are entrusted to spread love which we experience as faith, and truly respect the dignity of *all* persons. In so doing, we will no longer be caught up in being anxious about earthly things. Instead, we will become the liberated children of God, as intended by God, and be free to love one another—through "thick and thin," through bear markets and bull markets, through *all* things temporal, because we are fixed upon that which endures: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. (2nd Cor. 13:14)
Amen.

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