

+ Two years ago, on the fourth Sunday in Lent, when I was visiting St. John's on leave from the Reformed Episcopal Seminary, Fr. Mark was bold enough to let me climb this pulpit, for the first time, and preach on this Sunday's propers. Now, on my last Sunday as a transitional deacon, I get one more go. On the one hand, our gospel lesson is St. John's account of the feeding of the 5,000, that remarkable miracle which is the only one to appear in the writings of all four evangelists. Those of us who have been able to attend Wed. night bible studies, over the last few weeks, have already had opportunity to meditate on the aftermath of that miracle, for it is in the context of the feeding of the 5,000 that Christ declares himself to be "the Bread of Life," which, if a man eat, he shall never hunger, but partake of that eternal life which He shares with God the Father. The feeding of the 5,000 was a watershed moment in Christ's ministry, and our Calendar repeatedly offers it up for our consideration—as if to say: pay attention, this is important. The feeding of the 5,000 is the gospel text for the Seventh Sunday after Trinity, for today, and also for the last Sunday of the Church year, and I had opportunity this last "Stir-up" Sunday to address it; all this to say that, as important as the gospel text is, I'm electing, today, to focus on the Pauline text from the letter to the Galatians, though I hope to bring it around to bear on the gospel, in the end.

"The first will be last, and the last will be first," Christ told his disciples, and perhaps no figure illustrates this better than the person of St. Paul. This is, I think, because his life and preaching taps into a deep narrative that runs throughout the scriptures. There is a long tradition, in the Old Testament scriptures, of a remarkable narrative pattern. It goes something like this: the firstborn son, who ought to possess dignity, and who ought to demonstrate virtue, both of which are his properties as heir of the household, falls short in some regard. His place is taken by a younger son who, though not entitled by law or custom to the privileges of the inheritance, takes the place, or threatens to take the place of the elder. This act of usurping the favor of God, of parents, or of both, provokes a bitter counter-reaction on the part of the dispossessed. The result of this persecution varies from story to story. Cain rises up to slay Abel, as if in vengeance against God himself. Jacob flees before the face of Esau, and, although the brothers are reconciled to each other, eventually, the seed of enmity is sown between the Israelites, Jacob's descendants, and the Edomites, the nation born from Esau. This enmity lasts all the way down until New Testament times, when Herod the Great, an Edomite who marries into the royal family of Judah, is still seeking, in his bloodthirsty insecurity, to slay the threatening children of Jacob in Bethlehem. Joseph is reviled by his older brothers for his dreams of lordship and importance, and they sell him into Egyptian slavery, unwittingly starting a chain of events that fulfill those very dreams. After Moses leads the people up from Egypt and into the desert, Aaron his brother is made high priest of Israel. His firstborn sons, Nadab and Abihu, heirs to the office of high-priest, are put to death by God for priestly malpractice, and the priesthood passes to the younger sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. Moses himself, at the last, is not allowed to accompany the people into the promised land, and that office belongs instead to Joshua. And this is only scratching the surface.

Of course, the most remarkable Old Testament instance of this narrative pattern is in the history of King Saul and King David. Saul is anointed by the prophet Samuel, albeit reluctantly, as king over Israel. However, after his kingship proves more and more to be self-serving and tyrannical, the young shepherd of Bethlehem, David, is anointed in his place. Saul persecutes David over the course of many years, until his death in battle leaves the throne to David, the

rightful king. It is in this role of Old Testament Saul, the bitter and usurped older brother, that the New Testament Saul of Tarsus originally stood, “breathing out threatenings and slaughter,” as the Book of Acts tells us, against the early Christian church. The New Testament account, however, takes a surprising turn. Saul is blinded on the Road to Damascus, baptized by Ananias, and then erupts as the most active apologist and evangelist for the Church. He discards his Hebrew name, *Saul*, meaning something like “answered prayer,” or “that which was asked for,” and begins instead to use his family's Roman name, *Paulus*, meaning, appropriately enough, *small one*, or *least*. This least of the apostles, as we know, was responsible not only for the spread of Christianity to much of the Gentile world, but his epistles account for almost half of the books in the New Testament, if only about a fifth of the total content. Saul's, or rather Paul's story, is a surprising reversal of that Old Testament pattern, in which the “older brother” is actually turned *into* the younger, and Saul the Pharisee is new-created as Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.

This awareness of having turned from the old and toward the new remained with St. Paul throughout his ministry, and we see it on display particularly in this letter which he writes to the Church in Galatia, a church which he helped to establish. In a certain sense, the Galatians were ripe for conversion. Originally, the Galatians had migrated to what is modern-day Turkey from north-central Europe—they were ethnic Celts, or as the Romans called them, Gauls (hence *Galatia*), from what is now France and Germany. Because of their progressive removal from their ancestral homeland, and movements through and among peoples of widely different shades of pagan religion, the Galatians were particularly open to religious persuasion, adaptation, and assimilation; this meant that many had responded gladly to Paul's preaching, forsaking their mish-mash pagan past in favor of Christ's salvation. However, this same temper of openness exposed the Galatians to other influences as well. After Paul had preached there, certain missionaries had come to them, probably from Judaea, to inform these new converts to Christianity that it was necessary for them, if they would truly be saved and members of God's covenant people, to be circumcised and to observe the Mosaic Torah, with all its dietary and ceremonial stipulations. A great number of the Galatians, apparently, accept this modification of the gospel which had been preached to them by St. Paul, with results that aren't difficult for us to imagine. There develops, within the Galatian church, a sort of bifurcated hierarchy, a division between the “enlightened” and “truly committed” Christians who now adopt and begin to take pride in their Mosaic observances, and those for whom St. Paul's original proclamation—i.e., the sufficient and truly catholic salvation through Christ alone—was good news enough.

That this doesn't sit well with St. Paul is an understatement. The letter to the Galatians is perhaps his most violent and impassioned, with I Corinthians a close second. Having experienced a marvelous transformation—having been turned from the older to the younger brother, St. Paul is now aware of a disturbing and dark possibility. The younger brother may be turning back into the old; the Christian may be reverting to the Pharisee. In the epistle reading for today, St. Paul turns on a kind of rhetorical whirlwind, doing his best to capture for his Galatian audience what is really at stake here; he employs an almost dream-like logic to illustrate the pattern of old vs. new, of faithlessness supplanted by faithfulness, of the vindication of the younger son, that is, of Christ Himself. “Tell me, you who desire to be under the Torah, don't you understand the Torah?” Paul asks them, “For it is written that Abraham had two sons”—first, Ishmael, his firstborn, his child by Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid to his wife, Sarah. We

remember that Abraham the first patriarch, called by God to leave his home and travel to a distant, promised land, was unconvinced by God's promise that He would make his descendants as numerous as the stars. Abraham then effectively replaced his wife, who was barren and unable to have children, with his wife's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. Hagar functions as the dark reflection of Sarah, and Abraham's union with her is the dark perversion of faith. It is a doubting, grasping, and manipulative approach to God and his promises, a human attempt to bring into being that which God alone can bestow. In effect, Abraham takes God's promise, that his descendants would be numbered like the stars, and attempts to bring the promise to pass on his own terms and in his own time. Ishmael becomes a living type of the sacrifice of Cain, of the building of Babel's tower, or of the golden calf forged by the Israelites at Sinai, over which they proclaimed: "behold your god, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt." It is Isaac, on the other hand, the "child of promise"—the son of a woman considered barren, a type of Christ himself in that his conception and birth are a divine miracle—who is held up as the picture of an ideal faith. The same narrative pattern, the persecution of the younger by the older, comes to pass also in this story.

The shocking thing that St. Paul communicates to the Galatians is that the Jews, in rejecting Christ, have turned the Torah itself, as Abraham perverted the promise of God, into an ineffectual sacrifice—into an Ishmael instead of an Isaac. Paul equates the old Covenant, that which was given through Moses on Mt. Sinai, with Hagar the Egyptian, and with the earthly city of Jerusalem itself. What is at issue is not the substance of the Torah—not with that proclamation in history "I will be your God, and you will be my people"—but rather its abuse. For the Jews have turned the Law into an idol, an instrument of condemnation for themselves and others, a method of securing Divine favor without true relationship with, without true faith and loyalty to God himself. This is not acceptable service to God, a God who proclaims mercy rather than sacrifice, and who prefers the faithfulness of the younger son—even if that faithfulness takes the form of humiliation and repentance—to the haughty self-confidence of the elder. This grasping perversion of faith is, in fact, a form of spiritual slavery. True freedom—the freedom of the child of promise, the son not of the bondwoman but of that Jerusalem which is above, the heavenly city which descends in the person of Jesus Christ—this freedom is, paradoxically, a surrender of our own striving, of our grasping after life on our own terms.

Now, as Gentile Christians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the temptation offered to the Galatian church is not likely to be our temptation. It's difficult enough to give up meat for Lent, let alone to leave off bacon forever. I don't foresee many of us running off any time soon to adopt a sort of quasi-Christian Judaism. But what Paul pointed out was that Hagar, which answered in his day to "the Jerusalem which is now," i.e., to Pharisaical Judaism, was the symbol of something much older and deeper, one could say a permanent inclination of rebellious humanity. To what does Hagar correspond today? That, I think, could be the subject a thousand homilies. The short answer is, Hagar corresponds to the sum of those things in us which cry out: you cannot be saved without *this*. It will have to be Jesus Christ *plus this*. You will need social respectability and the approval of your peers. You will need political power and influence. You will need money and economic security. You will need romantic satisfaction. You will need physical health, time, leisure, education, and the list goes on.

Now, don't hear what I'm not saying. True faith and reliance on the work of Christ does not mean, "me and my bible," as so many of our Protestant brethren seem to have concluded. To

be a child of that Jerusalem which is above is to be a brother and a sister to all the children of her who, in the providence and mercy of God, now has many more children than she who has a husband—this is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. To embrace the gracious salvation of God is to graciously embrace those whom He came to save.

I said that I would try to connect the epistle to the gospel. Towards the end of his discourse which follows the feeding of the 5,000, Christ emphasizes to his disciples: “the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and truth. The flesh profits nothing, but the Spirit gives life.” He spoke these words, of course, because the people who followed him eagerly after the miraculous feeding did so, not because they recognized Him for who He truly was, the very bread of heaven, the fulfillment of God's promise to His people, and the pledge of eternal life, but because they were merely seeking from Him more of the bread which passes away. They were looking for Ishmael, when Isaac was standing in front of them. Let us resolve, today, not to be satisfied with or to seek after that bread, but to feed on the Eternal bread of God, and to seek after the Jerusalem which is above. Let us accept and act the part of the younger son—of Abel, Jacob, Joseph, and David, of St. Paul, and of our Savior Himself. Let us cast out from our souls that which is born of the bondwoman, and receive with humble gladness both the body and the blood of Christ.