

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 12 March 2023
Third Sunday in Lent - Year A

1st Reading: *Exodus 17:1-7*

Psalm: 95

2nd Reading: *Romans 5:1-11*

Gospel: *John 4:5-42*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✚ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the places we lived in England for a couple of years was a town in Northamptonshire called Finedon. It has what may be the oldest pub in all of England, serving up brews since the year 1042, nearly a thousand years. Local folk, ordinary folk, still frequent this pub, but during World War II there was at least one frequent visitor to the town who was anything but ordinary. Just down the street from the house where we lived, around a corner, behind the church, is a manor house. And this was one of the secret locations from which the exiled leader of France, Charles DeGaulle, helped to lead the resistance against the Nazis when France was occupied by the German army.

And Finedon was the town where Coral and I came face to face with some of the class divisions within British society. In that church down the street from our house, we noticed that there were only a few people like ourselves who sat in the front part of the church, whereas most of the people sat in the few rows of pews in the very back. And although this may seem to us Lutherans to be a normal state of affairs, it isn't really that way in most English churches. It took us quite a while to understand what was going on, but one particular incident seemed to explain everything.

The rector of the church, the pastor, told us that there was an American woman who had lived in Finedon for about 20 years, after she had married a native of the town, and she was one of those who sat in that back part of the church. So, one Sunday, Coral approached her and invited her to come to our home some time. She responded with a very definite "No". Coral then asked if maybe she could come to visit her in her home, and again was given a rather cold "No".

Somewhat taken aback, Coral asked her why she wasn't willing to get together, and the woman replied, "Because of where you live". "Where do we live?" Coral asked her, and the response was: "You live in the posh part of town". It was then that we began to understand what was going on in that church. The people who sat in the front part of the church were the "posh" people, the educated people, whereas the people in the back of the church, who *chose* to sit there rather than mix with those who were better educated than themselves, were members of a different class altogether.

And what surprised us the most was that it was the members of what we might consider to be a lower class who were the ones who disdained those in the higher class. There is a term for this: Reverse Snobbery. It was not the higher class people who were snobbish towards those who might be considered beneath them; rather, it was the *less* educated who considered themselves to be far superior to those who *were* educated. And the longer we lived in England the longer we saw how this reverse snobbery played out in British society.

There was also a rather different class system in Palestine in the time of Jesus, and John gives us a glimpse of it in his Gospel:

The contrast could hardly be greater. In last week's Gospel reading, from John 3, a man named Nicodemus, a rich leader of his people, a scholar, a respected pillar of the community, one of God's chosen people, a Jew, came to Jesus secretly at night to ask him questions.

In today's Gospel reading, from the very next chapter in John, Jesus himself initiates the conversation by asking his own question to a nameless, seemingly insignificant woman, an ordinary person, probably relatively poor and uneducated, of questionable moral character, not a Jew but a Samaritan, one of those despised by the Jews as inferior.

So there we have it, two people at the opposite ends of the spectrum in First Century Jewish society. And yet, as it turns out, what Jesus has to say to these two very different people is remarkably similar. To Nicodemus he spoke of being born of water and the Spirit, and how the wind, the Spirit, blows where it will and we don't know where it comes from or where it is going. Today, he speaks of giving living water to drink, that God is Spirit and those who worship him worship in Spirit and in truth. To Nicodemus Jesus says that God has sent his only Son so that those who believe in him will have eternal life. Today, he says that he is God's Messiah and that the living water he gives will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

It is the same message, spoken to these two contrasting people: Jesus is God himself with us, bringing us eternal life through the water of baptism and the Holy Spirit.

And what today's reading tells us is that this message is not just for those who are rich or powerful or wise or learned. It is for everyone equally, the great and the small, those who seem deserving and those who seem undeserving. Jesus speaks to all of us in the same way. He doesn't use lofty language just for those who are particularly capable of understanding. He uses the very same lofty language for the humble and simple. Because although his words *are* lofty, calling us to ponder the deepest truths imaginable, his words are also *simple*, intended for everyone.

The same is true of Paul's letters, especially his letter to the Romans, from which we have been reading during Lent. Paul's original intention was to have each of his letters read from start to finish in one go at the church to which it was written. His letter to the Romans would have taken a good half an hour to read in its entirety, and was addressed to everyone in the church, young and old, rich and poor, learned and uneducated. So his message was intended to be understood by all those in the church.

And that message is again profound and yet simple: "while we were still weak, Christ died for the ungodly. Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then will we be saved through him." God has taken the initiative to redeem all of us, no matter what class we may seem to be, if only we will accept that redemption, drink the living water Christ offers us from the well of eternal life.

Amen!

Copyright © 2023 - Thomas J. Mosbø