

LAETARE (LENT 4)

Isaiah 49:8-13

For He who has pity on them will lead them.

“For He who has pity on them will lead them.” Can you think of a better arrangement? Who would you rather have lead you than He who has expressed a love flowing from nothing more than His desire to love. If He has loved you when you were not His own, when you could offer Him nothing, when you had nothing left to do but die in sin and burn in hell, how will He not love you once He has given Himself to make you His own, even on your bad days, even when you have morning hair and no makeup on. “For He who has pity on them will lead them.”

Pride convinces the dumb they are witty, the fat they are big-boned, the ugly they are dapper, and the slow they are deliberate, but pity switches shoes with them. Pity leads the strong to flex muscle for the weak, pries open the rich man’s hand for the poor, sets the respected man’s lips in motion to defend the disrespected. While self-pity is perhaps the most pathetic of postures, the posture of the Most Powerful is conformed to the hump-backed plight the pitiable. Pity looks out, not in, and puts the needs of one’s neighbor ahead of one’s own, even when that neighbor is the least of all, even when that neighbor is an enemy.

And that is what we were. “You were once enemies of God,” St. Paul tells us in Colossians (1:21). It takes little to love a friend, but much to love an enemy. Yet what does the same St. Paul tell us in Romans (5:7,8)? “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” A soldier jumping on a grenade to save his comrades is bravery. A soldier jumping on a grenade to save his enemy, who, given the chance, would kill him, is pity. We were the enemy; Christ jumped on our grenade.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, an English poet, wrote, “Pity is best taught by fellowship in woe,” and Christ did not refuse fellowship with us in woe. He became a prisoner, as to prisoners He would say, “Come out” (Is. 49). He shone into our darkness, as to those in darkness He would say, “Appear” (49). He hungered and thirsted, as to the hungry and thirsty He would say, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat” (55). He was tempted in the desert, as to the wilderness He would say, “Blossom,” and to those dwelling there, “Be glad” (35). He was most afflicted of all, forsaken by God and man, as to the afflicted He would say, “Comfort, comfort, my people” (40). He became the Man of Sorrows, as to the sorrowful He would say, “I have seen your tears” (38), as to woeful He would say, “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for” (6). What place is there for fear among those who have such a ruler? “For He who has pity on them will lead them.”

What ought we who have a leader who has pity on us be but a people of pity, with pity a step before our tongues, with the words of St Paul tattooed on our hearts and minds (1 Corinthians 10:12), “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!”

St. Bernard of Clairvaux observed, “Justice seeks out the merits of the case, but pity only regards the need.” We do right to point out sin, to expose false teaching, to call back the straying, but we do well to do it in love and according to the need, and not the merits, of the individual. Justice and pity are not at odds with each other. Rather, they are dual aspects of a singular Christian concern. Justice desires the damning of the deed while pity desires the pardon of the doer.

A desperate man went to ask his bank manager for a loan. After reviewing his application, the manager smiled and said, “There is no way you should get this loan, but I will give you a chance. I have one glass eye. If you can guess which one it is, I will give you the loan.” The nervous man studied the manager's eyes for a moment, and then answered with confidence, “The left one is the glass eye.” The manager was stunned. “How did you know that was the fake eye?” “That was the one in which I saw compassion and pity.”

We confessed our sins today and God absolved us. He knew full well whose fault our mess was. We freely acknowledged it as our own, that we are poor and miserable on account of it. Yet what did He do? Did He say, “You're right, it was your own fault. You shouldn't have done any of that. You should be poor and miserable. How could you be so stupid? I hope you learned your lesson.” No, He spoke through your shepherd, “I forgive you,” not as an excuse for sin, but as an escape from it.

St. Augustine said that this is what love looks like: “Love has hands to help others. It has feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. This is what love looks like.” St. Augustine's picture of love sounds a lot like Christ, doesn't it? That's because it is Christ's love, the same love shown us on Good Friday, the same love shown to others through Good Fridays belated guests. And the Shepherd has plenty of pasture for His sheep, all of them, both those in the flock now, and those yet to have joined the fold.

Now is the time of His favor. Now is the day of salvation. The Lord Himself says so. So cast your hearts, bound with the guilt of sin and the anxieties of doubt, at the pity-pierced feet of your Prince of Pity. He will not despise them. He will revive them with His promises. “For He who has pity on them will lead them.” And all that is left is to sing. “Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! for the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.” Now that's music to forgiven ears. Amen.