

Ps 126; Is 43:16-21; Phil 3:4-1; Jn 12:1-8

The Goal > Becoming His

Our psalm for today references the exile in Babylon. It celebrates return – and the renewed joy of ascending to the temple to worship God. This traveling theme is added to the theme of the Exodus out of Egypt when God parted the Red Sea and the whole nation crossed over on dry ground – looking back to see Pharaoh’s chariots and soldiers swallowed up by the rushing water returning to its natural state. They were headed for the Promised Land. The over-arching theme is God’s abundant grace and deliverance out of our prison of sin.

You and I are walking to Jerusalem with Jesus and His disciples. We may well remember the two great times of deliverance God gave to His people. We pray as we head for Jerusalem (figuratively) that we will come out of our own slavery and bondage and exile and receive the promised New Life. Christ is enthroned in heavenly places – and yet He walks beside us through our struggles and our joys. He is exalted and He is the ever-present Shepherd of our soul. His feet get as dusty as ours do.

This past week I thought again of Mother Theresa and her ministry in Calcutta, India. Saint Theresa passed away the year I headed out to study for the ministry (1997). She was an effective worker with the destitute and diseased street people of Calcutta. Even as she begged for and received the funds to build and expand Missionaries of Charity centers, she was criticized for not offering state of the art medical treatment for those her team picked up out of the gutter and brought back. She worked only to offer clean conditions, nourishing food and comfort to those dying from HIV-AIDS, leprosy and other diseases. Her critics claimed she and her order were not doing enough.

The question is: Whether Jesus-followers are to live with poor folks and offer them spiritual comfort – or build modern medical facilities in order to conquer disease. Is there a moral imperative demanding one or the other? Let's see if the Scriptures give us an answer today.

The Prophet Isaiah declares that God is about to do a new thing. If water means life instead of death in the desert; then, God is going to give spiritual water

that enables His people to ***declare God's praise***. (Is 43:21) Is that all? Is that not enough? This means apart from the mighty acts of deliverance God has already performed for His people (the Exodus out of Egypt and the restoration of the temple and the nation after the Babylonian exile) – He is about to pour out the water of Life more abundantly. He accomplishes this by sending His Messiah. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Consider Saul of Tarsus. He was building a brilliant career. He came to Jerusalem to study with the renown Gamaliel. Only the best teachers, only being in leadership at the temple. Only the best was good enough. He describes himself in his letter to the church at Philippi: zealous for God, hell-bent on eradicating this blasphemous cult known as The Way and most of all carefully and completely keeping the Law of Moses. He must have been a tiresome fellow in those days. Can anybody say “holier-than-thou”? He had lofty goals that brought him glory.

He speaks of all this in the past tense. Here's why: God knocked Saul off his high-horse. God struck

him blind, so he had to be led by the hand into Damascus. He was healed and then baptized by a true servant of the Lord Jesus Christ named Ananias. After that encounter with the living God, Saul renamed himself Paul, and a whole new chapter of his life began. Paul says, “For His (Jesus’) sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.” (Phil 3:8-9)

I ask you this morning: Is pure devotion to God enough? It is a huge question in the church. It can be a point of controversy – and that is fine. It can also become a point of division and even intolerance – and that is not fine. Beware of a religion that does not permit you to think and let think. If pure devotion is not enough, what must be added to devotion to make it complete? I ask you – must the hospice of the Missionaries of Charity become the Mayo Clinic? Or is the work of offering comfort and peace a true and whole calling of Christ?

Let's look in on Jesus. The time is growing short. Only six days to go before the Passover festival in Jerusalem. Yet, Jesus comes to the home of Lazarus and his sisters in Bethany. Bethany is very close to Jerusalem. He knows, and his disciples know, how dangerous it is to be so close to the temple authorities. They clearly plan to kill Jesus. We learn that many temple officials come to Bethany to see this Lazarus whom Jesus raised from death four days after he died. We learn also that they plan to kill Lazarus for good measure. They hope to blot out this passionate faith in Jesus that has begun to show forth even among the Jews.

Lazarus is hosting a dinner party for Jesus. Martha is serving the food – no surprise there. Lazarus is at the table with the guests. But Mary, a very loyal disciple of the Lord, brings in a large quantity of spikenard. It had to be imported from Egypt or India. The amount Mary had purchased cost about a year's wages. Mary pours this thick, amber fluid on Jesus' feet and begins to wipe them with her own hair. This is a new thing! This is an act of deep devotion to Jesus, acknowledging His divinity. Mary is worshiping Him. She is responding

to the working of the Holy Spirit in her heart. Only this very precious perfume will do. Only this humble act of service will show the Lord and the world what honor is due to the Christ, Messiah.

Jesus answers Mary's critic, Judas Iscariot. We learn from this passage that Judas, of all people, should not open his mouth on the topic of proper use of money. As Jesus defends Mary, He also prophesies what will soon take place. He can see ahead beyond His own death: Mary will bring a jar of spikenard, along with clean linen to the garden tomb. She will come to complete the preparation of Jesus' body for burial. This act of devotion will stand on its own merit. That future anointing cannot take place. Why would anyone prepare a man for burial who is fully alive? How can you embalm somebody who has walked away from the grave?

As you continue your Lenten journey, make time to go aside to pray and do devotional reading. The Lord knows your heart – and He always rewards those who seek Him and long to worship Him truly. The gift of your devotion is precious to the Lord.

My prayer for all of us is that our love for the Lord will take us out to share our faith with those who need to hear about this Way in the wilderness. Your witness points to the rivers in the desert – the water of eternal life. You are His and He is yours. Amen.