

The Twenty-Third Sunday of Pentecost

October 23, 2005

Exodus 22:21-27

Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-36

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“You were strangers in Egypt” – sojourners in a strange land. That thought was central in the minds and lives of God’s people.

They knew well what it meant to be a stranger – to be different; to be other.

Who has never been a stranger? Every one of us has, at some point in life been in the midst of new people, a new job, a new place – the unfamiliar.

Some of us have parents or grandparents – all of us have ancestors – who were strangers in this land. They were at some time immigrants. At some time they left everything familiar to set out to a new life and a new world. They were filled with a mixture of excitement, expectation, and fear.

Were they accepted by those they met in this new world – some better than others? Some slipped easily into that new life. But some were shunted off to the poorest land and the worst jobs, no matter who or what they actually might be – just strangers.

Let's reduce the scale of that story and make it personal. Do you remember your first day at school? Do you remember your first day at a new job or in a new neighborhood? Do you remember being new – being other – the feeling that they all knew each other and nobody knew you?

How did you feel? What did you need then? You needed a kind word, an outstretched hand. You needed to be acknowledged and recognized. You needed “compassion.”

Compassion is “seeing the needs of others and doing something about it.”

A compassionate God saw the plight of His people – perpetual strangers in Egypt. They were always the new people, never accepted, always marginalized. A compassionate God acted – saw their situation and reached down and lifted them out.

It was never forgotten; it must never be forgotten! We must always remember that we are the children of God, and that we depend on His compassion every bit as much as did ancient Israel, and that as we depend upon the compassion of God, so the stranger depends upon our compassion.

Many years later a young Pharisee approached a Rabbi from Galilee and asked him “Rabbi, what is the great commandment in the Law?” The Rabbi answered “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it; you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the prophets.”

The very life – the very culture – of the people of God rests upon these two traditions: Torah, the Law – the story of God's relationship with His people – and the interpretation of that relationship by the

prophets. In turn all that is in the Law and the prophets rests upon the great foundation of God's compassion for His people.

That includes us – you and me. Our Lord Jesus Christ, that Rabbi – is the perfect model of the love of God, the perfect model of compassion. He assures us, “I did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it.”

In His Holy Name.