

MARCH 18, 2018

JEREMIAH 31: 31-34

HEBREWS 5: 5-10

JOHN 12: 20-33

In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

I went to seminary already ordained as a deacon. That's a long time ago now.

I went to Nashotah House, a very old, traditional seminary in southern Wisconsin. All the students were encouraged to attend some local church on Sundays. Happy and I went to Saint Anskar's in Hartland, a small, country church, patterned after Swedish churches.

The rector, Paul Dix, somehow heard that I was ordained and asked if I would be his deacon. Paul had an interesting attitude toward the church. He said, "If you really don't believe in organized religion, the Episcopal Church is for you."

Even with that attitude, or perhaps because of it, Paul attracted quite a lot of guest preachers. I never really knew who I might be serving.

Bishops seemed to be attracted to Saint Anskar's. I suppose they wondered what on earth he was doing. Nashotah faculty were often there, probably gathering material for a book.

On several Sundays our guest was Bishop Stanley Atkins, the retired Bishop of the Diocese of Eau Clair, Wisconsin, then in residence as a Trustee of the seminary. He was English. With a strong voice, and an English pronunciation, he said, "Should my tears forever flow, should my zeal no languor know, all for sin could not atone:

thou must save, and thou alone; in my hand no price I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.

“Wow,” I thought! That must be from one of the great metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, John Donne or George Herbert. I was really impressed at the time.

Then, just two weeks ago, here at Christ Church at the ten o’clock service we sang “Rock of Ages” and there it was, verse two.

The author was Augustus Montague Toplady, not a metaphysical poet and not at all a household name. “Rock of Ages” was, and is, his only memorable hymn, the only one still in the hymnal.

Toplady also wrote such hymns as “A Debtor to Mercy Alone,” “Deathless Principle, Arise,” and “Object of My First Desire.” They were all favorites in the “Church Hymn Book of 1872.” Then, mercifully, they seem to have disappeared.

Those titles, and some others, should give us a picture of Toplady’s theology; he was a Calvinist. He lived in the middle years of the eighteenth century, a time of great upheaval in the Church of England.

He claimed to be Anglican and he was ordained in the Church of England but the church of his day had all sorts of people and all sorts of beliefs. It would make the Episcopal Church look organized no matter what Paul Dix thought.

Toplady believed in predestination, the theology that some people are to be saved, others aren’t, and there is nothing we can do about it. We don’t even know which category we are in.

Then there was John Wesley who preached what was called Arminianism, the belief that all people, everybody was destined for salvation, sometimes called the “Empty Hell” theology.

Toplady couldn’t stand Wesley. I suppose the feeling was mutual. Actually the Church of England wasn’t fond of him either.

Is there any particular reason you are sharing all this? The answer is “yes, there is.” Next Sunday will be Palm Sunday, sometimes call the Sunday of the Passion. The liturgy begins with a rather joyous Palm Procession and then quickly descends

into readings that tell us of the gathering darkness of the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus.

If you are a Calvinist you could say “I knew it. I told you so.” Without the knowledge of the Resurrection, without Easter, we need assurance as we approach The Passion. We have it here, today, in these readings.

We read a passage from Jeremiah that tells us of the covenant of God with His creation, with us. “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” That’s not a contract, it’s a covenant.

A few years ago one of my nephews asked me to take part in his wedding service at a Roman Catholic church in Annapolis, Maryland. I wasn’t sure that I would be welcome by the priest there but he was quite gracious and welcoming, asking me to be with him in the sanctuary, to read a lesson and lead the prayers and be with him to bless the couple.

It is a beautiful church in classic catholic style dating to the year 1853. It’s very popular for weddings. Actually. the priest’s homily was brief and to the point because we could see the next wedding party already in the back of the church.

He made the point that the difference between a contract and a covenant is the word “if.” A covenant doesn’t include the word “if.” God says He will be our God in the joys of a Palm Procession and in the darkness of crucifixion, not because of what we are or what we deserve but because we are His.

Are we expected to live up to our part of the covenant? Yes, it would be nice if we did but we have the assurance that when we don’t God will “...forgive our iniquity and remember our sins no more.”

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the “...source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him.” Jesus has been designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Who? Melchizedek appeared briefly to Abraham to feed him as he returned from a battle. The point being that as Melchizedek fed Abraham Jesus feeds Israel and Jesus feeds us. He feeds us, physically with His body and blood in the Eucharist; He feeds us spiritually in His every word and act

But in the reading from John we have our greatest assurance. Jesus says “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus will be “lifted up” on a cruel cross in the Crucifixion. He will be “lifted up” from His tomb in the Resurrection. He will be “lifted up” to the eternal life in the presence of The Father in His Ascension.

In His Holy Name.