

The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the

Second Sunday in Lent
Year C
RCL



Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Luke 13:31-35

The Collect

O God, whose glory it is always to have mercy: Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Luke 13:31-35

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

SERMON

Humans require, above all, a purpose in life. Watch what happens to people who hit the lottery, or those who are paid insane amounts of money to appear on TV because they are pretty. Insane amounts of money resolve all common problems of food and housing, leading to idleness, leading to a deep hunger for challenges, and the next thing you know, purpose has been defined as trying to kick a heroin addiction. Or look at the poor sods I used to confine to jail. No path to success. No road to the good life. No purpose in their lives. Purposeless lives lead to calamity. Humans require, above all, a purpose in life. In French, that purpose is expressed as “raison d'être” and it means, quite literally “reason for existence”. We are a reasoning species. We need to have a reason to exist.

Today, the second Sunday in Lent, we examine purpose. What is our purpose as we gather as a community of faith? Shakespeare said, “Aye, there's the rub”, and I heartily second the emotion. Why is the church still here? Is it not objectively an anachronism?

The culture in which we live increasingly answers that with a resounding “YES. The church represents superstition. We're modern people! We have moved beyond invisible men in the sky.” If that is the answer of our time, what is the purpose of declaring yourself to be a Christian? Are we not simply making of ourselves items of scorn?

Well, yes, but it has always been so. A hundred fifty years after Jesus' time on earth, Tertullian, the father of Latin Christianity, said, “It must be believed, because it is absurd!” What he is talking about is illustrated by a passage in a novel by Susan Howatch.

Then I, who was so very bad at worship and so very reluctant to be “churchy,” found myself thinking of Jesus Christ, living thousands of miles away in another culture in another millennium, writing nothing, completing his life's work in three years, a failure by worldly standards, dying an ignoble death—yet still alive in the little church at Rodel on the remotest edge of Europe, still alive for his millions upon millions of followers worldwide, not a despised, rejected failure any more but acknowledged even by non-Christians as one of the greatest

men who had ever lived, etched deep on the consciousness of humanity and expressing his mysterious message of regeneration in that most enigmatic of all symbols, the cross.¹

It has to be believed because it is absurd! Nothing that outlandish can remain for thousands of years unless there is something deep and mysterious powering it. Our purpose must be to restore a sense of wonder to a world which has arrogantly decided to turn its back on this, the greatest of wonders. Our purpose is to reintroduce the numinous, those moments when one becomes aware that there's something greater than ourselves all around us, to a world who has decided that all such wisdom is superstition.

Brothers and sisters, that's a handful of purpose! It is a purpose so precious that not even our lives are more important. In our Gospel passage today, Jesus is engaged in His Galilean ministry and speaks tellingly of His purpose.

Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

Jesus understood His purpose to be to go to Jerusalem and die and He willingly embraced it! It is that single-minded commitment to pursuit of His purpose which makes Jesus the model for all people of faith.

In place of expressions of fear and dread, though, what follows His announcement is nothing less than a love poem to His people.

How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Can you hear the heartbreak? Can you hear the sob, the break in the voice as Jesus says "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings"?

¹ Susan Howatch "Scandalous Risks"

Jesus is saying, “Find your purpose here, as we continue the work of restoration I began so long ago. Align your purposes with those of God and embrace them!” Frankly, that’s a tough sell. Jerusalem, Jesus says, was not willing. Neither is the world of our time. Our purpose must be to continue that work of restoration and atonement in the face of an unwilling world committed to its own ways and its own solutions.

“For the true radical is not the man who wants to root out the tares from the wheat so as to make the Church perfect: it is only too easy on these lines to reform the Church into a walled garden. The true radical is the man who continually subjects the Church ... to the claims of God in the increasingly non-religious world which the Church exists to serve.”²

We have a purpose in the world. We are chosen to subject the church to the claims of God upon it in a world that has blinders on. No one, least of all me, could lay out our purpose better than did Paul:

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Look at our brutal cross. This was the purpose Jesus spoke of, the one he intentionally went to Jerusalem to meet. What challenge stops you from pursuing your purpose?

AMEN

² Ibid.

BENEDICTION

When we align ourselves with God's purpose for us, we become real. That's not always pleasant, but it is the greatest accomplishment we can undertake. Margery Williams, puts it this way in *The Velveteen Rabbit*

“Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.'

‘Does it hurt?’ asked the Rabbit.

‘Sometimes,’ said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. ‘When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.’

‘Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,’ he asked, ‘or bit by bit?’ ‘It doesn’t happen all at once,’ said the Skin Horse. ‘You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.’

May the Lord bless you and keep you

May the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you.

May the Lord lift His countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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