

***Trinity VII Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins***

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by the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

Bishop of Saskatchewan

But now being made free from sin, and become servants of God, you have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death: but the free gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What is Prince Albert's favourite hymn? I know the answer, not based on any recent poll, or Internet vote, but I know the answer for sure. Prince Albert's favourite hymn is "Rock of Ages." Now, I mean by Prince Albert, not the city, but the person, the Prince Consort, husband to Queen Victoria, after whom the city is named. The great Prince repeated this hymn on his deathbed and is reported to have said, "For if in this hour I had only my worldly honours and dignities to depend on, I should be poor indeed." In the face of death, the Prince knew well, that what mattered was not his status,

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his reputation, his honour or his accomplishments, but only that Christ had died for him. The hymn says, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling. Thou must save, and Thou alone.”

Rock of Ages was, in Prince Albert’s time, one of the three or four most popular hymns of English-speaking Christians. And it remains popular, not for grand eloquence or worldly wisdom, but for its bold and clear assertion of salvation by grace alone, which is the good news of God’s saving, forgiving and life-giving love in Jesus Christ. Augustus Toplady, the poem’s author, was a Church of England priest of Calvinist leanings, and it is thought that he wrote the piece to counter Wesleyan views on personal holiness. For the author, no matter who we are, we come to God empty, naked and dirty, trusting not in our righteousness or holiness, but always and only in God’s justifying mercy in Jesus Christ. This doctrine has been of great comfort to many Christians throughout the ages,

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especially to those who have known that there was nothing else to cling to, but the Cross of Christ. It is not our deserts, but grace that we plead, for what we deserve for our sin is death. But what God gives is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The subject of the Epistle reading for today is Service and Salvation, and I hope that we can think about these and how they relate.

It was Bob Dylan who sang:

You may be a construction worker working on a home,

You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome,

You might own guns and you might even own tanks,

You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own banks

But you're gonna have to serve somebody,

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You may be a preacher preaching your spiritual pride,

You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side,

You may be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut  
hair,

You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir

But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord

But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

We all serve and obey someone. Paul writes just a verse before today's Epistle reading, "Know ye not that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey?"

We all serve and obey someone. Our claim to have no master only

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means that we are serving some hidden master, our lower selves, our selfish interests and the like.

Paul apologizes - and I cannot imagine that the blessed apostle was the most frequent apologizer. He apologizes for using such strong language, of slavery in reference to our service either to sin and our selfish selves, or to God and his righteousness.

This language of slavery, or in our day a more helpful but equally strong analogy might be that of addiction, is true and helpful. For like slaves or addicts, something else has the power over you. In fact, much addiction and moral slavery stems from a refusal to accept a higher power, and then innumerable default higher powers who are willing to take God's place in your heart and life, swallow you up.

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Paul's first point, then, in that Epistle is that we all have been saved to serve. Before, we served sin, and the result was shame, a moral hangover, and the end of that service was death. But God has delivered us from that bondage into the perfect freedom of his service. Remember that our Lord defines himself as the one who came to serve, and we who seek to follow him must also be defined by service, the loving and sacrificial service of God and neighbour.

In our Gospel, we have one sketch of Jesus about that service, feeling and acting upon compassion for people. There are innumerable lessons in that Gospel, about gratitude, saying grace at meals, and sharing and distributing food so that all may eat. But it is the leftovers, the superabundance at the end, which is the key point. They began with seven biscuits and end with seven baskets of leftovers!

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What the disciples had to offer that day was most inadequate: seven rolls for four thousand people. But when they offered what they had and Jesus blessed it, it became more than enough. We are used to thinking about that lesson in terms of the giving of our money or assistance to the needy, but I want you to think of it today in terms of your service, your ministry – in other words, what you can give in terms of your abilities, time and effort. For God is saying to you and me, “You give me what you’ve got, and I’ll take care of the rest. You give me what you’ve got, however little or inadequate, and I’ll take care of the rest.” Our service is a matter of surrender to the will of God, of giving whatever we have to his love.

We have been saved to serve, but let’s be careful that we get this right, for there is a danger in our day of preaching salvation by ministry. Our service is a response to God, to his free and unmerited love, favour and mercy, upon which we are always wholly

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dependent. We serve him because he first served us. Look at today's Gospel. Jesus first gives the bread to the disciples. He serves them, then they serve others. We serve him, because he first served us. And we serve him because he saved us. We do not serve him in order to be saved, but because we have already been saved.

And this is Paul's final point in our Epistle. Having emphasized this Christian service, he reminds us that our service does not save us. Rather, it is a response to the gift of salvation. We cannot get right with God by our works. We cannot earn God's love, we cannot buy salvation, and we cannot demand forgiveness. It can only be, as it is, a gift - a free gift of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let no one then demand of God his wages, for your wages are death. Rather, ask in faith through Jesus Christ, and eternal life is yours.

Jesus knows better than we do, the journey that lies ahead for each one of us, and he would not have us faint by the way. He

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knows that we have nothing, but he provides food for our journey.

This food comes from his own grace, not from our deserving, to feed us on the generous love of God. He serves us, so that we may be strengthened to join his service.

The lesson of God's generous grace of Rock of Ages, is the lesson of every Holy Communion. We come naked, to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ. We come to be cleansed, freed from the power of sin and cleansed from its guilt. We are taught in the Holy Communion to come to God empty-handed: "Nothing in my hands I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling." These are words with which to come to Christ, words to live by, and as for Prince Albert, words to die by. Amen.