

Passion Sunday Lent V Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

Bishop of Saskatchewan

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

You are free children, not bound servants. In Jesus Christ, God has redeemed you from slavery and adopted you as his children.

This is the Gospel of the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of the Son of God. The Good News is that God - Jesus the Son - has become our brother in the flesh, that we might become the children of his Father in the Spirit. And he has ransomed and redeemed us from slavery to sin and death, that we might be free. We, then, who were wicked servants, have become redeemed children, who have received the liberation of forgiveness and eternal life.

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Jesus Christ has liberated us from sin and death. We have been freed from the slavery of dead works to serve the living God. Now, there is so much confusion and wrong thinking in the world about true freedom, and these errors constantly creep into the Church and into our souls. We get suckered into worldly conformity and thinking, and we mistake self-promotion as greatness, and slavery to our own opinions and lusts for freedom.

But, the Bible says to us as Christians, “it shall not be so among you”. Christian freedom does not mean the free reign of personal opinion and selfish lust. That is our old slavery. We confuse the ability to be led in all things by our own notions, opinions and tastes as freedom, but that is nothing but slavery to our selfish selves.

Rather, Christ tells us that when we hear and heed his words, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”. It is the truth

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which makes us free, not popular or personal opinion, and to be ruled by anything but that truth in Jesus is slavery.

Secondly, freedom - Christian freedom - is not selfishness but selflessness. This is part of the great mystery. It is expressed clearly in the Gospel for today, and we are reminded of it every day in the second collect, for Peace, of Morning Prayer. We speak there of God, whose service is perfect freedom. It is service, or more boldly, slavery to the will and love of God, which is our freedom, just as self-sacrifice is life. That collect translates from the Latin as "To serve is to reign."

In the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ, human freedom and human greatness are redefined. In his service and self-sacrifice, what it means to be human and free, and the measure of that humanity, is completely redefined. To serve is to reign, and that service is greatness.

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Jesus looks on his disciples, he sees and hears them jostling for priority, arguing over who is the greatest, and he declares, "It shall not be so among you." That is a subtle but ringing condemnation. Hear it, and let it ring out in this place: "It shall not be so among you." What we commemorate in these next two intense weeks is this: the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Many people look on the cross of Jesus with only one eye open. Some of us consider Jesus' suffering and death as the price paid for the sin of the world, but ignore the example of his service and self-sacrifice. Others of us are wide open to Jesus' example of unjust and innocent suffering, and of service to others, but turn a blind eye to his sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. We are encouraged today and in the next two weeks to open both eyes wide, and to see

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in the death of Jesus both the sacrifice for sin and the example of life.

In the Epistle, it is the willing and sinless sacrifice of Jesus which is held out before us. It was impossible for the blood of unwilling animals to pay the price of willful human sin. And it was impossible for the offerings of sinful priests to atone for others. But Jesus Christ is the perfect Priest and Victim in one. He is a willing Sacrifice, offering himself, unlike the animal sacrifices before, and he is a sinless Priest, unlike all sinful priests who came before. So the blood of Christ is different. It is saving because he offered himself without spot to God, and that sinless and willing self-sacrifice obtains an eternal redemption.

The Epistle then holds out the doctrine of the cross of Christ as the sacrifice for sins. In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of his death as a ransom. In other words, by his giving of his life, in our place, he has

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bought us, or "redeemed" us from sin and death. We have been purchased for God by the price of his blood. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.

That is one eye open on the cross of Jesus Christ. But the cross is not only the means of life, it is the way of life. We cannot truly receive it as the sacrifice for sins, unless we embrace it also as the example of life. The disciples failed to see the necessity of Jesus' cross and therefore of their own. Their mistaken hopes for themselves were based on a mistaken understanding of Jesus. For if the Christ must suffer and die, then so must the Christian. Jesus said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." This is the second eye open on the cross, and one which professing Christians so often close.

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Remember that there is a moral to the story of Jesus' passion. Love in this world means sacrifice and suffering. True greatness is found in sacrificial service. Self-preservation is self-destruction. Selflessness is true glory. Think, then, of that passion of Christ. "Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

These two aspects of the cross and passion of Jesus are summarized at the end of our Gospel reading. We are invited to re-learn true greatness from Jesus' example of service, as well as to embrace the giving of his life as our ransom. Two figures embody these twin emphases for us to meditate on in the next two weeks. Like Barabbas, we may know that the death of Jesus is our ransom,

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that this man took our place. He was bound that we might go free.

He was condemned that we might be pardoned. He died that we might live, and that we would cherish the freedom, and pardon, and life, which his blood-shedding has won for us.

Like Simon of Cyrene, we might take up the cross and follow Christ. Like him, we might not get to go cross shopping and pick out the exact way in which we would choose to share in Jesus' suffering and service, but we might receive the cross laid on us and bear it after Christ. I place those two figures before you in these two weeks, who embody the receiving of Christ's sacrifice and example: Barabbas and Simon of Cyrene. Jesus Christ gave himself a sacrifice for us, and an example to us. In these two weeks, we want to renew ourselves in receiving his sacrifice and following his example.

"Whoever will be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the

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Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." +