

# The Servant



First, light,  
filtered through linen and lidded eyes;  
then the rumble of thunder  
of the rolling stone;  
then the taste of vinegar  
lingering on my lips;  
(The shroud sticks to my face  
as I sit up,  
helped by four strong hands  
on my arms,  
then falls away.  
It all falls away.)  
Then I rise, and feel again  
the earth beneath my (wounded) feet;  
then walk, unsteadily at first,  
(the strong hands at my shoulders)  
out into the new green world.

*"Then, Easter" — TSH, 2004*

#275

*Eastertide 2025*

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### *Where there's a will*

You can assist and further the ministries of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory by remembering the community in your will. If you choose to do so, the following form of wording is appropriate:

*I hereby give, devise, and bequeath to The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, Inc., a New York State not-for-profit corporation and its successors for ever \$ \_\_\_\_\_ and / or \_\_\_\_\_ percent of my estate to be used in such a manner as determined by its Directors.*



*The brothers in Convocation...*



*... and Province 3 on retreat*

## Resurrection Dreams—New Beginnings

Christ's victory is our victory as well! For many, Easter, with the commercial things that now surround it, loses its meaning — except for those, like us, who continue the celebration until Pentecost. Perhaps it would be good to look at this period to examine some new beginnings?

We might take the opportunity to look at our prayer life. Those not under the discipline of a Rule might begin praying the Daily Office. Start slowly, just saying Morning Prayer at first. There are so many verses in the Psalms that can and do lead us in new directions — new beginnings! It is not only contemplatives who meditate. Some call it mental prayer, and so it is. Take just a few minutes to center and settle and listen. Let God do the talking and leading. You would be surprised where silence can lead.

The Psalms are a tremendous guide and inspiration. For meditation, simply open the Psalms anywhere. You will be amazed how they will give you a guide — just relax and enjoy them.

The use of the Jesus Prayer can be a real path to open new thoughts, feelings, and yes, dreams. At bedtime, every night, I go to sleep with the Jesus Prayer, each night being perhaps a different supplication or concern. "Jesus, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner." At some Brotherhood Convocations, we sing the prayer, as it was given to us by Sr Helen Joyce VHM.

These are just a few tried and true Resurrection Dreams. May they lead you to New Beginnings.

RTB

From the Minister General

## All my hope on God is founded...

These are evil days! The current political climate is driven by greed, self-aggrandizement, a hunger for power, and blatant contempt for empathy and compassion — factors that have created a prevailing sense of fear, uncertainty, and doubt. It is no surprise that family, friends, and co-workers have been quick to relate that they are living with a constant sense of foreboding, wondering what new evil will be cast

upon them by those in political power. Evil is exactly the right term here since it is quite clear that greed, hunger for power, and disregard for compassion are just that: morally wrong and harmful (in essence, sinful) and encompassing actions and character traits that are the cause of suffering and harm. While I do not presume to judge the actions of individuals as *intentionally* evil, as that judgement belongs to God who alone knows what is in the human heart, it is quite clear that the actions themselves are indeed evil.

The evil that stems from the sin of greed is well documented in scripture. Nonetheless, the media is currently rife with political leaders and the influential wealthy touting the importance of “America First” or “me first” and spreading a myth of scarcity intended to rally others to their position. In March 1999, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann published an essay in *The Christian Century* entitled “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity.” He wrote:

We who are now the richest nation are today's main coveters. We never feel that we have enough; we have to have more and more, and this insatiable desire destroys us. Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity — a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity.

If you have never read this article in its entirety, I strongly encourage you to do so; his perspective is remarkably relevant. Our own Saint Gregory was famous for dispelling the myth of scarcity, giving generously from the wealth of Rome to all in need or distress, and referred to himself as the “steward of the property of the poor.” Saint John Chrysostom wrote eloquently of the evil of placing one's own needs above the needs of others in his “Discourse 2 on the Rich Man and Lazarus,” saying: “Not to share our own riches with the poor is a robbery of the poor, and a depriving them of their livelihood; and that which we possess is not only our own, but also theirs.”

To understand the evil of self-aggrandizement and a hunger for power, we have only to turn to Saint Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule*. In the section on “Of the weight of government; and that adversity is to be ignored, while prosperity is feared,” he wrote:

We have shown how heavy the task of governing is, lest someone unequal to such office dare to profane it, and through desire of high rank find himself holding an office that leads to damnation. Saint James affectionately deters us, saying: *Be not made many of you masters, my brethren.* [3.1] Even the mediator between God and humanity — the one whose knowledge and wisdom ranks above that of the angels, and who reigns in heaven from eternity — fled from receiving an earthly kingdom: *When Jesus perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into the mountain by himself.* [Jn 6.15] Who could have been so blameless as to rule over humanity as the one who reigns over the whole creation? But the Savior came not only to redeem us by his passion, but to instruct us by his example — so he would not be made a king; instead, he went of his own free will to death on the cross. He fled from the offer to be set up above all and accepted the pain of a lowly death. This is so we would learn to flee the favors of the world, to fear no terrors, to love adversity for the truth's sake, and to shrink from prosperity.

With these words Saint Gregory makes it quite clear that those who care only for self-aggrandizement and power are choosing the path of evil and sin.

When it comes to blatant contempt for empathy and compassion, I will turn to my own personal experience as a gay man and a physician dedicated to helping to care for the underserved and the vulnerable. The current administration's blatant attempts to roll back health care and human rights for LGBTQIA+ people, and even to erase the very mention us from our country's history is nothing but pure evil. This isn't about concerns over diversity, equity, and inclusion, or Christian theology, it is nothing but thinly veiled racism, xenophobia, and the demonization of "other" as defined by narrow-minded cis-white-heterosexual men threatened by that which they do not understand. Anyone who truly thinks that there are only two sexes does not understand medicine, genetics, biology, or theology! Anyone who takes issue with diversity, equity, and inclusion as basic principles of Godly love, is only interested in uniformity, inequity, and exclusion. Anyone who maintains any of these positions, clearly only espouses contempt for empathy and compassion, and wants no part in bringing about God's kingdom of justice, peace, and love in the world.



I had the opportunity to travel to Washington, DC, to lobby Congress as part of the National Association of Community Health Centers' Policy & Issues Forum (<https://www.nachc.org/conference-page/policy-issues-forum/>). During that time, I had the privilege of speaking with several of our more progressive legislators in support of continued funding for community health centers across the US and to provide testimony against attempts to ban access to medically necessary care for gender-diverse people:

Policies that restrict or ban access to necessary medical care for Transgender and gender-diverse youth are harmful to patients and their families. Transgender and gender-diverse youth need comprehensive, individualized, family-based care from multidisciplinary teams. Healthcare decisions should be made by patients, families, and their healthcare professionals, guided by evidence-based practices, clinical guidelines, and individual needs rather than government mandates. To allow such restrictions or bans to go into effect would result in irreparable harm to patients and families, and undermines the trust that patients place in healthcare professionals. Additionally, contrary to what others would have you think, the work that we do as gender care physicians is well informed by evidence-based and well-respected guidelines published by the Endocrine Society and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). The necessity of well-informed gender care is well documented by the U.S. Trans Survey (USTS) 2015 and U.S. Trans Survey (USTS) 2022, widely hailed as two of the most statistically significant studies of gender-diversity in the US, with the USTS 2022 representing an unprecedented 92,329 respondents. While these studies are limited to respondents over the age of 18, they document the substantial challenges faced by gender-diverse individuals in the US, including their experiences in their youth and childhood. Those experiences include pervasive mistreatment and violence, severe economic hardship and instability, and harmful effects on physical and mental health that result from their inability to access gender-appropriate care. The work that we do as physicians is aimed directly at combatting these issues by providing appropriate, medically necessary, and life-saving gender care for gender-diverse patients. Anything that interferes with that care is contradictory to our various oaths as clinicians and our collective goal of improving the health of all.

And yet, during my time in the legislative office buildings on Capitol Hill, I was overjoyed to find signs of hope in the many rainbow and trans community flags still gracing the halls of Congress; clearly sending a message that now is not the time to back down or stay silent and to never lose hope. As true Christians, we can never lose hope because our hope is found only in the ever-living Love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ, risen and present with us today, and in the effectual work of the Holy Spirit. The words of Joachim Neander summarize this beautifully:

All my hope on God is founded;  
he doth still my trust renew,  
me through change and chance he guideth,  
only good and only true.  
God unknown, he alone  
calls my heart to be his own.

Mortal pride and earthly glory,  
sword and crown betray our trust;  
though with care and toil we build them,  
tower and temple fall to dust.  
But God's power, hour by hour,  
is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness e'er endureth,  
deep his wisdom, passing thought:  
splendor, light, and life attend him,  
beauty springeth out of nought.  
Evermore from his store  
newborn worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty Giver  
bounteous gifts on us bestow;  
his desire our soul delighteth,  
pleasure leads us where we go.  
Love doth stand at his hand;  
joy doth wait on his command.

Still from earth to God eternal  
sacrifice of praise be done,  
high above all praises praising  
for the gift of Christ, his Son.  
Christ doth call one and all:  
ye who follow shall not fall. [*Hymnal* 1982, Hymn 665]

With this in mind, last week on the Feast of Saint Gregory the Great, I wrote to my brothers that they must never lose hope, despite the fear, uncertainty, and doubt instilled by our current political climate of greed, self-aggrandizement, a hunger for power, and blatant contempt for empathy and compassion; it is our mandate to be part of the powerful chorus of voices speaking out truth to power. Each of us must take up this work, knowing that no matter how small our voice may seem, that there will be many others beside us to support us in fulfilling this mandate.

In a moment of serendipity (that being another name for the Holy Spirit), this past weekend the retreat leader for the Province West retreat introduced us to the fundamental theological understanding of “stability of mind,” which emphasizes the importance of trusting in God and God’s promises to cultivate a mind focused on God’s truth and seeking God’s peace, to find hope and to overcome instability, which is the product of fear, uncertainty, doubt. An understanding beautifully captured by another hymn, in the words of Georg Neumark,

If thou but trust in God to guide thee,  
and hope in him through all thy ways,  
he'll give thee strength whate'er betide thee,  
and bear thee through the evil days. [*Hymnal 1982*, Hymn 635]

With that, my beloved, go forth and speak truth to power with stability of mind, and the certain understanding that we will make it through the evil days together in the love of God.

CAD

*Here and there with the Brotherhood*

## Community Notes

*Winter Convocation 2025*

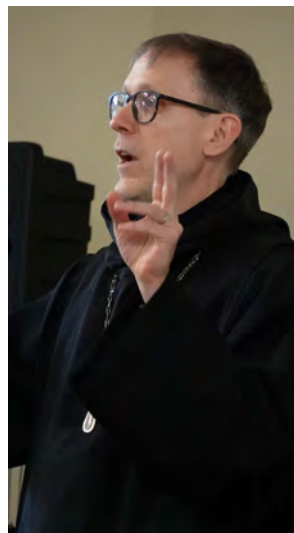
The Brotherhood gathered at the Roslyn Conference and Retreat Center of the Diocese of Virginia, located in Richmond, in the third week of January, its second visit to this welcoming venue. Having been there in the heat of last year’s summer, we were delighted to experience it in mid-winter.





*The brothers listen attentively to Chad-Joseph's presentation.*

William Henry Benefield (West Texas), the Brotherhood's Director of Education, developed an engaging retreat for all who attended Winter Convocation 2025. The retreat leader was the Very Rev Chad-Joseph Sundin OSBCn, Prior-General of the Canons of the Order of Saint Benedict and founding Prior of the Community of Saint Mary of the Annunciation in Tempe, Arizona. Chad-Joseph (photo at right) also serves as the Chaplain for Episcopal Campus Ministries at Arizona State University and as the Co-Vicar of Saint Augustine's Episcopal Parish in Tempe, where he nurtures inter-generational parish life rooted in the practices of traditional Anglican spirituality.



The retreat explored Martin Thornton's theological vision of the three-fold framework he calls "the Rule of the Church" in his 1959 book *Christian Proficiency*, drawing out some practical implications for the ministry and witness of dispersed religious communities such as the Brotherhood in parishes and in the wider church.



*David Luke celebrates as Joseph Basil assists.*

As always, the daily retreat sessions were set within each day's round of worship, prayer, and refreshment as provided by the Daily Office, the Holy Eucharist, and ample time for conversation and rest. The Masses were celebrated by Tobias Stanislas Haller (Maryland), David Luke Henton (Rio Grande) and David Benedict Hedges (Arizona) with the assistance of deacon Edward Munro (Maryland), together with other members of the community, including Sacristan



*The Daily Office anchors the day with prayer.*

Eric Shelley (Southwestern Virginia). Preaching highlighted each day's liturgy, and the texts of each sermon appear later in this issue. The daily music schedule was organized by Director of Convocation Liturgy and Music Nathanael Deward Rahm (Chicago), and he and William Henry provided keyboard accompaniment at the chapel's grand piano.

Winter Convocations are times for retreat, prayer, and the Holy Eucharist, as well as fellowship for as many members to attend as possible. For this reason, no major meetings are scheduled during Winter Convocation. Since some serve as doctors, nurses, and teachers, arranging for time away — so soon after Christmas— is not always possible.



On Wednesday afternoon, Minister General Ciarán Anthony DellaFera (Massachusetts) and Minister Provincial of Province 3 Eric Shelley met with Jason Peter Seta (Pennsylvania) for the renewal of his annual vows of profession. (They are seen in the photo at left endorsing the renewal document.)

Winter Convocation 2025 concluded with Morning Prayer and Holy Eucharist on the Commemoration of Florence Li Tim-Oi, the first Anglican woman ordained to the priesthood. Every opportunity for our brothers to gather is important to each of us and, while attendance at Winter Convocations is difficult or even impossible for some, depending on their work schedules, health, and weather, it is always a time of good cheer and catching-up, regularly punctuated with laughter and even a few tears of remembrance. We are grateful for these opportunities as times apart, when we can restore our souls and return home to our many ministries refreshed, reinvigorated, and anxious for our next gathering.

### *Province 3*



Christopher Robert Werth (Maryland, seen at left with Edward Munro) has been called to a new ministry with the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland's Discernment Process. People seeking discernment enter a 13-month formal process, overseen by the Commission on Ministry. It is led by four mentors (a lay person, a deacon, a priest, and a member of a religious community) meeting monthly, in person or by Zoom, with those in discernment. Christopher Robert will represent the call to religious

life for the program. This is the first time religious life has been part of the process, and he considers it a great honor to have been asked to serve in this role.

Christopher Robert had been in discernment himself ten years ago, and through it came to understand that ordained ministry was not the path he was called to follow. He will now help others discern their call and increase awareness of religious life as a way to exercise a vital ministry. In addition, his appointment serves as a sign that this is a ministry that needs to be included in any person's experience, even if they are not part of a formal diocesan process.



✠ January 26 marked the celebration of Religious Life Sunday in The Episcopal Church. Edward Munro and Christopher Robert represented the Brotherhood at All Saints Episcopal Church in Frederick, Maryland together with members of seven other communities (see photo above).

The morning began at the early coffee hour where community representatives shared information about their respective communities with members of the parish and among themselves. It was an excellent opportunity for learning and networking. This was a first-time event for the parish, which has members of several religious communities within the congregation.

Following the coffee hour, members of the communities joined the parish for morning worship. They took part in the entrance procession and were introduced to the larger congregation. At the close of the liturgy, several members of the congregation who had not attended the coffee hour greeted Edward and Christopher Robert, asking about the Brotherhood and religious life and communities.



⊕ The members of the province enjoyed a Gregorian retreat just a few days after the annual commemoration of Saint Gregory the Great, at the Maritime Conference Center in Linthicum, Maryland. We were very happy that our Episcopal Visitor Rodney R Michel was able to be present for the entire event. Tobias Stanislas Haller (Maryland, seen above at right delivering a reflection) led the retreat on “The Nature of God and Our Relationship with God.” It included a look at how Julian of Norwich understood the Trinity, and our relationship with that Divine “Being and Loving” through prayer. The second session engaged with the question of prayer itself, as part of this relationship. The retreat ended with *lectio divina* on Gregory’s “Prayer to Christ in his Passion.”

The gathering was well attended and offered many opportunities for prayer (both personal and corporate), reflection, and fellowship.

### *Province 5*



Joseph Basil Gauss (Chicago) received the Endeavor Health / Evanston Hospital 2024 Nursing Excellence Award in December of 2024 — he was nominated by his peers, some of whom appear in the photo to the left. We join them in heartfelt congratulations to our brother!

✠ Ronald Augustine Fox and Joseph Basil (Chicago) participated in Evensong at Rockefeller Chapel on the campus of the University of Chicago on February 19th — Ronald Augustine was MC and thurifer for the event and Joseph Basil sang with the Church of the Atonement Choir (photo above).



✠ On March 12th, the Feast of Saint Gregory the Great, Ronald Augustine completed a five-week online course, “Catholic Social Teaching,” from Boston College. The course facilitator wrote, “Your voice from the Episcopalian perspective has been an invaluable component of the dynamics of the course. Thank you for taking the time to show we Catholics that there is another way to think about ideas and topics that the Catholic Church has a tendency to foreclose.”

### *Province West*

A few months ago, David Benedict Hedges (Arizona) and his colleague Fr Dominic Moore (Vicar at Church of the Apostles in Oro Valley) were bowling together, when the possibility of producing a podcast on the teachings of The Episcopal Church arose. David Benedict’s wife Carly suggested the title, “Walking the Dogma,” and they were off.

The first part of the project will span about thirty episodes — a discussion of the Articles of Religion, much of what they say still relevant to the life of The Episcopal Church, some less so, but all of it fodder for some interesting discussions.

Episodes will be released every other Thursday. You can check it out in your favorite podcast app on your smartphone or other device, or visit us on the web at <http://www.walkingthedogma.org>. If you enjoy the show, be sure to share it with friends and family on your social media. Thank you for listening!



## Agnes and Cecilia

*“Behold, now I come to you whom I have loved, whom I have sought, and for whom I have always longed.”*

There are more than ninety-three miles of underground tunnels on the outskirts of Rome. These tunnels were developed as burial sights which also became places where Christians in the area buried their dead. The Christian catacombs are extremely important for the history of early Christian art, as they contain the many examples from before about 400 CE, such as the image of Christ as Good Shepherd. These are places where Christians went to pray for their dead and Eucharists were celebrated there. In fact, when I visited some of them for the first time it made a huge impression on me that we do have historical evidence of the early practice of Christians praying for the dead and seeking the intercession of saints. One can find graffiti of these early Christians asking the saints for prayers. “O Peter and Paul, intercede for all of us.” Two well-known catacombs you can visit today are those of Saint Agnes in the northeast part of Rome and Saint Callistus in the southeastern part of Rome along the Appian Way. These two places — about 7.5 miles apart from each other — contain the original tombs of the martyrs we remember today: Agnes and Cecilia.



We know that Agnes died at just twelve years of age and underwent tremendous torments: fire, according to Pope Damasus; decapitation, according to Saint Ambrose; while according to others, the veins in her neck were severed. Devotion to Agnes boomed right after her martyrdom. Both Roman and foreign pilgrims visited her tomb. She was also venerated very much by Emperor Constantine’s family. She along with Cecilia are two of seven female martyrs mentioned in the first Eucharistic Prayer from the Roman Missal — known as the Roman Canon — which was organized by our own Patron Gregory in the 7th century based upon earlier Eucharistic Prayers.

In the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington DC, there is a chapel dedicated to Saint Agnes. The altar has a mosaic of Agnes holding a lamb, a symbol of both her purity and her status as a bride of Christ. In fact, today in Rome, two lambs were blessed, and their wool will be used to weave the pallium for Roman bishops — like one you can see on images of Augustine of Canterbury whom Gregory the Great sent on his mission in England. The frontal of the altar displays another lamb, along with a dove bearing Agnes's soul to heaven. The Latin text of the mosaic translates “Behold, now I come to you whom I have loved, whom I have sought, and for whom I have always longed.”

Agnes is an example of completely dedicating one's life to Christ. She was willing to suffer and die for her faith when she could have lived a life of comfort and prominence as the wife of the governor's son.

The historical facts concerning Cecilia are harder to ascertain. Her date of martyrdom is November 22, her traditional feast day in the western church. It has been taken over by CS Lewis in our current Episcopal Calendar and perhaps she was moved to today since she was also a martyr in Rome. We know she died during a persecution, but given there were so many in the ancient church, it is hard to say exactly which one. Some put it as early as the reign of Marcus Aurelius, somewhere in the 170s. Some put it in the reign of Severus Alexander, the 220s. One of the best historical estimates seems to come from where she was buried: in the Catacomb of Callistus; in the section that dates from the late second century.

According to fifth century sources, Cecilia was of noble birth and was betrothed to a pagan named Valerian. Cecilia's witness resulted in the conversion of both Valerian and his brother, Tiburtius. Because of their conversion, the brothers were martyred, and it was while Cecilia was burying them that she too was arrested. After several failed attempts to put her to death, she died from injuries sustained by the ordeal. Pope Urban ordered her buried with the bishops and martyrs in the Catacomb of Callistus.

The earliest representations of Cecilia focused on her martyrdom, typically symbolized by a palm of victory. It is only in the Middle Ages that Christian art gives her a musical instrument — usually a hand organ — as an attribute. What it is that connected her to music — the music of her wedding or her hearing heavenly music (an idea captured

by Raphael in his Saint Cecilia painting) may offer some explanation. The painting depicts Cecilia as the patron saint of musicians and church music, listening to a choir of angels in the company of Saints Paul, John the Evangelist, Augustine, and Mary Magdalene. Commissioned for a church in Bologna, the painting now hangs in that city's Pinacoteca Nazionale.

The English Romantic poet Percy Shelley described the painting:

The central figure, Saint Cecilia, seems rapt in such inspiration as produced her image in the painter's mind; her deep, dark, eloquent eyes lifted up; her chestnut hair flung back from her forehead — she holds an organ in her hands — her countenance, as it were, calmed by the depth of its passion and rapture, and penetrated throughout with the warm and radiant light of life. She is listening to the music of heaven, and, as I imagine, has just ceased to sing, for the four figures that surround her evidently point, by their attitudes, towards her; particularly Saint John, who, with a tender yet impassioned gesture, bends his countenance towards her, languid with the depth of emotion. At her feet lie various instruments of music, broken and unstrung.

Agnes and Cecilia — two martyrs of Rome, two young women that give us examples of the beauty of belonging to Christ without hesitation. Two examples, among many, that remind us that Christianity, if you do it right, might even get you killed. May our own song always be from the depths of our heart: “Behold, now I come to you whom I have loved, whom I have sought, and for whom I have always longed.” Agnes and Cecilia, pray for us. Amen.

*William Henry Benefield*

*A Convocation Sermon*

## *Memories of martyrdom*

*You are greatly glorified in the assembly of your saints. All your creatures praise you, and your faithful servants bless you, confessing before the rulers of this world the great Name of your only Son.*

When we consider the martyrs, the natural focus is on their great faith and devotion, even unto death. But I believe it is sometimes instructive to consider the circumstances of their martyrdom and likewise how their oppressors operated and what motivated them.



Yesterday William Henry noted that with the martyrs of the Roman Empire, it is difficult to know which persecution was going on at the time — but in the case of Saint Vincent it is well established that he was put to death during the persecution by the emperor Diocletian. This was the last, longest, and bloodiest Roman persecution; it lasted ten years. The persecution, like many of his moves as emperor, was part of his effort to fulfill what he saw as his mandate to restore the Roman Empire to its former glory. It feels familiar.



It included various, shall we say, executive orders, which took steps such as the demolition of particular Christian churches, the prohibition of Christians gathering for worship, and the destruction of their Bibles and liturgical books. In various provinces of the empire, the edicts were carried out with greater or lesser acts of violence at the discretion of local judges, but some victims were burned alive.

The second and third edicts called for the arrest and imprisonment of bishops, priests, and deacons, but soon the small prisons of the time were so full that violent criminals had to be released to make room for the clergy. The fourth edict required Christians in each city to gather in a public place and offer sacrifice before the idols of the Roman gods.

It is in this context that Saint Vincent of Saragossa gave his life for the sake of the Gospel. As a deacon, he had the role of assisting his bishop, Saint Valerius, who had a speech impediment and appointed Vincent his spokesman and diocesan preacher. They were both brought before the governor, who ordered that Vincent be set free if he would throw a Bible into the fire. Vincent's refusal so enraged the governor that he sentenced Vincent to a series of horrific tortures, after which he was thrown into a prison cell and died of his wounds. He bore the ordeal with such peace and grace that his jailer converted to the Christian faith.

We have had quite a succession of martyrs in this week's commemorations — Pope Saint Fabian on Monday, Saints Agnes and Cecilia yesterday, and Saint Vincent today, all of them under the various

Roman persecutions — all of them branded as threats to imperial power and order.

Jesus cautioned his disciples that they might face, if not death, then at least persecutions as the cost of their discipleship. He taught them to keep all things in perspective — that the rulers of this world had power over them, but only temporal and not eternal power; to let their trust in God rule over their fear of powers and dominions.

The irony of our time is not that many Christians are afraid to acknowledge Jesus before others. The danger is that so many are hell-bent on acknowledging Jesus, or rather, on being acknowledged as his followers, and letting that be the full extent of the public display of their skin-deep Christianity. These may be the very rulers of this world before whom we will be called to confess the great name of God's only Son. Jeremiah called to the officials and people to repent — note that in Jeremiah's time they did not repent. Some theologians have said that persistent and definitive refusal to repent is the very essence of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that cannot be forgiven, in the words of Jesus from today's Gospel and last night's Evening Prayer lesson.

But as Jesus says, "Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." The prayer, "For our Country," in the Book of Common Prayer says it well: "Almighty God... in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail."

*David Benedict Hedges*

*A Convocation sermon*

## God's Justice Isn't Ours

*The landowner said, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"*

James and I have an annual Christmas tradition of watching the Alistair Sim version of *A Christmas Carol*. It is fresh enough in my memory — and I hope in yours — for me to mention a scene from it. It is from Scrooge's younger days, as the Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge to the time when Mr Fezziwig threw the annual Christmas party for his employees. The Ghost sees old Scrooge enjoying the party, and says, "A small matter to make these silly folks so full of gratitude." Scrooge

protests that it isn't small, so the Ghost asserts, "Why! Is it not? He has spent but a few pounds of your mortal money: three or four perhaps. Is that so much that he deserves your praise?" Scrooge responds, more like his youthful self than what he has become, "The happiness he gives, is as great as if it had cost a fortune..." And as he speaks, he realizes how much he has changed since those happy days.

Well, in our Gospel today we see a man like Fezziwig — someone eager to employ people, but also generous to them. Had he been like old Scrooge, you better believe he would have parsed those wages by the hour, the latecomers pro-rated to a pittance. But no, he is generous, and does as he chooses with his money.



+ + +

But wait a minute. If he is as *generous* as he says, why not give the *full*-day workers a bonus? Those who work all day in the hot sun get only what they bargained for, and *they* do not see generosity — but favoritism. In their eyes, it *just isn't fair*.

And you know what? They are right; it *isn't* fair; but the landowner doesn't claim to *be* fair — no, he is *generous*. And that is the point of the parable. For generosity isn't about giving people what they deserve, or more than they deserve, but about the freedom of the generous to give out of their abundance; freely, not constrained as if in debt, but solely because they wish to give.

Now as in all the parables, Jesus is not telling us about agronomy or sound business practice, but about God and our relationship *to* God — what God's kingdom is like. He is telling us about God's generosity, as well as reminding us about human envy, how easy it is to presume upon generosity, to expect it, to resent it when others receive it.

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The lectionary for Phillips Brooks pairs this Gospel with Jonah's reluctant assent to the task God set for him. Jonah is a bit like Scrooge — and unlike the generous landowner. He first rebels against the task God

sets precisely because he knows God is generous and will forgive the repentant Ninevites. He thinks they don't *deserve* God's grace.

And *he's* right, too. That's what makes it grace. For grace and generosity are precisely needed where credit isn't earned or deserved. None of us is so good that we *deserve* grace; none of us earns it, however much good we do; God doesn't *owe* us anything. And yet our loving God *gives* us everything — even God's own self, in person, in Christ, the great ransom of our life. God *isn't* fair by human standards — of “just desert” or even of the labor movement's “fair day's wage for a day's work.” As Frederick Engels pointed out, labor's appeal wasn't really about fairness, because workers give their full energy to their work, but employers pay them only a tiny portion of their own abundant wealth. This is part of why Engels wanted all resources to be in the hands of the workers, and he could have used our parable as a proof text against capitalism.

But leaving Engels aside, this parable can help *us* to understand that God isn't fair, but generous. As Paul reminds the Ephesians, God can do (and does) abundantly more than we can ask or imagine. God, like Mr Fezziwig, doesn't count the cost of bringing joy, but simply brings it. And God brings that joy not just on Christmas — though that is when we celebrate the start of it all — but pours it out abundantly on every day of the rolling year. God, thank God, is gracious and abundant in steadfast love all the time. As our Psalm at Evening Prayer last night (Psalm 109) forcibly reminded us, most of the people who pray for justice are praying for a judgment *on someone else*. It's always, “Give the wicked their just deserts!” but “Have mercy on *me*!”

Thanks be to God that God's generous mercy always outweighs God's strict justice. If it were not so, who could stand? None of us worked the whole day — all of us are latecomers, all fall short, and God chooses to be generous to us not only because God *isn't fair* by human standards, not only because God is *good* through and through, the abundant fountain of all goodness, the generous well that never runs dry — but also because we finite beings cannot receive more than God can give.

For there is only one day's wage, my friends, one day's wage we work for, one day's wage we can be paid, paid ultimately for the work we didn't do, but which was done for us by the Son of God: the one day's wage of the one Lord's Day which will last forever, the one day's wage

of the kingdom of heaven. God can give us no more than that, nor can we receive more.

No, God isn't fair by our standards. God rescues ungrateful, disagreeable, judgmental, ornery wretches, like Jonah, Scrooge, and us, and feeds them with bread from heaven. God gives the latecomer the same favor as the one who works all day. And God gives us *himself*, my brothers. So let us not be envious, but rather rejoice to know, with Phillips Brooks and all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the unsurpassably generous love of God.

If I may paraphrase our Patron Gregory, let us listen, not to Engels, but to angels — those who “keep their watch of wondering love”; listening to them along with Phillips Brooks, as those “morning stars together proclaim the holy birth, and praises sing to God the King, and peace to men on earth!”

*Tobias Stanislas Haller*

## *A Convocation Sermon*

### *Time to go fishing*

*Gracious is the LORD and righteous; our God is full of compassion. (Psalm 116:4)*

I am amazed by the gentle vulnerability present in today's Gospel. This vulnerability is not only present in Simon Peter but also in Jesus. Jesus shows up and decides to give instructions to the fishermen. I obviously asked myself, what in the world! Is a carpenter giving a fisherman instruction on how to fish?

I believe that this is a fair question. However, there is also an underlying sentiment of judgment, or perhaps even an assumption on my part. Jesus was a carpenter, but does this mean that he cannot fish? He can.

Peter's reluctance to accept Jesus's suggestion to cast the net shows a bit of apprehension on his part. In Simon-Peter's defense, they must have been exhausted from fishing for hours and upset since they came up empty-handed. Following Jesus's instructions,



they cast their nets. Again! The story tells us that they collected so many fish that both boats almost did not make it. Peter's reaction towards the nets being completely full of fish was one of self-reflection with a hint of embarrassment. "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Simon Peter shows great vulnerability and humility in that statement.

Then Jesus kindly says those beautiful words, "Do not be afraid." How can they not be afraid? We must not ignore that these men know what they are doing when fishing. They know how to cast the nets. They know when the best weather for fishing is. They know how to cast these specific nets in a circular form. This is the type of fishing they are talking about in this story. The fishing they do is a collective effort and they know that. These men had gifts that should not be ignored.

These men must have been confused by Jesus's instructions working so well. They probably thought to themselves, "Well, I guess we don't know everything about fishing as well as we think we know." These men had witnessed and participated in a miracle. Who is this man? That even the fish follow him!

Then Jesus tells them not just, "Do not be afraid," but "From now on, you, will be catching people." Jesus instructed these fishermen to take a new approach to their vocation. Jesus comes just when they probably thought that they had everything figured out for themselves. We did not catch anything, so it was time to go home. Then, here comes Jesus, and gives them another way. These fishermen are in a vulnerable position, where they have been called to relearn what they do best; they have been called to earn their livelihood.

Mother Florence Li Tim-Oi is also an incredible example of vulnerability and strength during constant change. Always reminding herself of the Psalmist's words, "I am a worm." Imagine surviving in labor farms, factories, and political camps; serving in dangerous areas. Then finally moving to Canada and having her priesthood suppressed. Let us not forget the amount of verbal violence that she received at the hands of the church, and the quantity of racism and sexism she suffered. However, always maintaining her humility and faith, casting nets like Simon Peter. Simon Peter, the fishermen in the other boat and Mother Florence all have something in common. They were open when the Spirit said that it was time to adjust. Florence answered with a yes, even when facing danger, then faced her own in the church that disagreed

with her being a priest or even a woman in church leadership and a woman of color.

I assure you that if Mother Florence had been ordained in The Episcopal Church today, she would still have to suffer racism, sexism, and mistreatment from those in leadership, lay and ordained. But yes, as a church we have changed a lot. We can say that, as a church, we have been listening to the Spirit to adjust our way of fishing; but let us not get too comfy in our padded seats. Our church at times spends too much time cleaning the nets and not enough time casting them into the deep. Mother Florence's example, like the apostle Peter, teaches us that when we listen to the Spirit, our vocations flourish and blossom in ways we could not have imagined. God calls us to prophesy in a world full of fear, trauma, and confusion.

As we continue with our respective callings, we face moments of vulnerability, especially when well-established routines and practices are shaken and at times completely broken down. In moments of reflection, we may wonder and ask why certain situations are so painful and why must it be as they are.

Sometimes, we immerse ourselves deeply in grief and sorrow, covering ourselves in profound mourning for what we hold close to being most beneficial for our personal and professional lives. It is difficult to listen when you have already decided what is best for you instead of listening to the Spirit's calling. To listen to the Spirit's voice telling us, "It is time to go," or "Your work here is done." "Your new work awaits." "You are fishing for fish that are no longer there." It takes vulnerability and courage to transform. The focus should not be on the empty nets but on that Divine Carpenter giving us fishing advice. That Divine Carpenter that tells us, "Do not be afraid." We are being called again! To Live! Dangerously! like Mother Florence, like Peter, like Bishop Budde. As we leave this place and get back on that boat again, be ready to cast those nets into the Deep. My brothers! Get on the boat and cast the net again! We have people to catch!

*Angel Gabriel Roque*

