

Sunday 11th March 2018. 4th of Lent/Mothering and Refreshment Sunday.

St John 3:14 *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*

The fourth Sunday of Lent rejoices in a number of alternative labels. Laetare Sunday was its old-fashioned name, after the Latin text of the introit with which the Catholic Mass of the day traditionally began – O rejoice Jerusalem, Laetare Jerusalem. Writing in the thirteenth century, the then Pope Innocent III was to say "On this Sunday, which marks the middle of Lent, a measure of consoling relaxation is provided, so that the faithful may not break down under the severe strain of Lenten fast but may continue to bear the restrictions with a refreshed and easier heart". Thus it also became known as Refreshment Sunday, when certain consoling relaxations of the penitential observances of Lent were permitted in church as well as at home. Flowers were temporarily allowed back into the chancel and the clergy wore rose-pink vestments rather than the usual darker purple. Richly decorated fruitcakes known as Simnel cakes were eaten to give energy and enthusiasm to the remaining weeks of the Lenten fast. Laetare Sunday, Refreshment Sunday, and of course Mothering Sunday – originally an ecclesiastical occasion too, when congregations would make a pilgrimage to visit their mother church, and nowadays within families an opportunity for mothers to be singled out in recognition of all that they do. Laetare Sunday, a glimpse of joy in the midst of the dark days of Lent; Refreshment Sunday, a lightening of the load and an easing of the restrictions; Mothering Sunday, an opportunity to acknowledge what is so often taken for granted; each in its own way offers an interruption to the usual routine, an exception to the rule, a lifting, however temporary, of the burden.

Lifting, appropriately enough, is the theme of all our readings this fourth Sunday in Lent, however you want to describe it. Even the Epistle talks of God raising us up in union with Christ Jesus. But the theme is most obvious in the other readings for the day. *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*In the third chapter of his Gospel, St John clearly refers back to our Old Testament lesson, the account of the journey made by the people of Israel towards the Promised Land. At the point where we briefly joined their journey this morning they were at an early stage yet already complaining about their situation. "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the desert where there is neither food nor water?" they ask Moses. From the perspective of the middle of Lent it's appropriate enough that they should be in the wilderness and going without food and water, but without the prospect of any sort of refreshment they would rather they were back in slavery in Egypt. For their impatience they receive no reward, only punishment, as God sends venomous snakes among them and it is only when they eventually acknowledge their sins that Moses receives his instructions to make a serpent as a standard. "So Moses made a bronze serpent", we are told, "and erected it as a standard, in order that anyone bitten by a snake could look at the bronze serpent and recover". Hence the comparison in John's Gospel. *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...*A means of recovery here too, a means of restoration, a means of refreshment. *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up in order that everyone who has faith may in him have eternal life.*

*As pants the hart for cooling streams
In parched and barren ways,
So longs my soul for you, o God,
And your refreshing grace.*

Like a cooling stream in the wilderness, like an oasis in the desert, like a green hill far away at the end of a dusty road, the effect of all our readings on this fourth Sunday in Lent is to lift our spirits, to lift up our hearts, to raise us up in union with Christ Jesus. I'm not so sure about that green hill though. I'm not so sure it ever was actually green. Nowadays it's anything but. It's covered in narrow streets and ancient buildings and it's well within the confines of the old city of Jerusalem. In those days it was undeniably "outside a city wall" But I think it's unlikely it was ever literally green. Certainly George Macleod, in his book "Only one way left" thought otherwise. "I am recovering the claim", he wrote, "that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves; on the town garbage-heap; at a crossroad so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek; at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble". The town garbage-heap, a dump, a dismal, dirty place. Nothing green about it, and no point in pretending otherwise. And yet in painting her pretty picture of a green hill far away, the Victorian hymn-writer is after all offering us an image for Refreshment Sunday. I've been watching the garden over the last few days as it emerged from last weekend's blanket of snow. The crocuses are crushed and the daffodils confused, but the snowdrops shook off the snowdrifts and carried on regardless. Perhaps something similar could be applied to the green hill too, emerging from the wilderness of winter, showing new signs of life, a capacity for recovery, for refreshment, for restoration. Even on the dismal dump of Calvary. Especially, surely, on the dismal dump of Calvary.

*There is a green hill far away,
Outside a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified,
Who died to save us all.*

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...Just as once they looked at the bronze serpent and recovered, so now everyone could look at the Son of Man lifted up on a green hill far away and find in him the prospect not only of recovery but of resurrection.

*I came to Jesus as I was,
Weary, worn and sad;
I found in him a resting-place,
And he has made me glad.*

Laetare Jerusalem, rejoice. *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, in order that everyone who has faith may in him have eternal life.* And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever.

Amen.