

**The Church of the Holy Trinity,  
Rittenhouse Square,  
1904 Walnut Street,  
Philadelphia, PA 19103**

October 21, 2007

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 24, Year C

Preacher – The Reverend Terence C Roper, Rector Emeritus,

Revised Common Lectionary

Texts – Jeremiah 31:27–34

Psalm 119:97–104

2 Timothy 3:14–4:5

Luke 18:1–8

Theme – “Persevering with Steadfast Faith”

I mention the theme of this sermon up front as I do because I want to be sure that you know where I am going with it even it may not be obvious that I got there in the end. The quotation is from the Collect appointed for today, Proper 24, and this is the sentence in which it appears, “That your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your name.”

It had been my intention to WOW you this morning by drawing brilliant associations between the scriptures texts for today and selected works of Renoir, but, alas, that is not to be.

I did get to see the Renoir Exhibition on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and a wonderful experience it was. I went on Monday with some members of the English Speaking Union to which I belong. I think they suffer me as a member even though I have this pronounced English accent. Some special provision in their By-laws, no doubt. We were conducted through the show by a very knowledgeable and enthusiastic docent. She and the paintings overwhelmed me; I’m not sure which the more, but either way, I was stumped. I treated myself to afternoon tea later in the week, and it was over the cake plate that inspiration struck.

Had you realized already, and you probably have, that Jeremiah is a chocolate torte? I love chocolate tortes; all those wonderful layers!

Jeremiah is a particularly rich chocolate torte, and I suspect that nobody has ever determined how many layers. Lots!

In the section of Jeremiah's book that we are in today, a section sometimes referred to as Words of Comfort and Hope, scholars have found no less than nine layers stacked one upon another, mixed, blended together. It's an archeological dig of a book, as you can tell.

What comes out of this lesson read today is a glorious vision, a vision of hope, promise, renewal, restoration, rebuilding and redemption. The new spirit that shall indwell the nation will result in a new people, in a new relationship with God, is a new covenant founded in Faith-full-ness.

This is not to say that God has or will overlook the unfaithfulness that has brought divine retribution upon the Children of Israel. Every last sin must be accounted for and paid for in full. God is not mocked or conned. However, when that is done, the new order begins.

So there is always reason for rejoicing, always reason for pressing on in faith, regardless of appearances to the contrary, regardless, no matter what. Press on in faith. Let the prayers of the faithful ascend before the throne of Grace, though God be lost to our eyes, and no word from his holy lips be heard in our land. That's the quality of faithfulness that is expected, demanded. This is rich fare indeed.

Do not be deceived into thinking that in such company this psalm merits nothing but a buttered scone and lightly buttered at that; no jam, no fruit jelly and no clotted cream. Not so. Even though Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Psalter, 176 verses, it is not to be charged with verbosity. It is tightly wrought. Each section of its twenty-two sections begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph through Tau, in alphabetical order.

Today's section of 119 is titled Mem, section 13, 13th letter, and it is a beautifully designed little poem in its own right, Its connection to Jeremiah's lesson is not difficult to see; If love of God equals love of God's Law, then the speaker is in love with it. "Oh, how I love your law! All the day long it is in my mind."

That's denotes commitment. Here we have faithfulness as faithfulness should be manifested. It is full and complete; anything less would be unacceptable.

In verses 98 through 102 the psalmist makes it clear that God's Law is more than sufficient for life and its vicissitudes. He goes on to rejoice in the sweetness of God's words; they are sweeter than honey to his mouth. This is not scone stuff, this is baklavas!

Where is this going, all this sweetness and flowery talk? You may well ask. It comes to an abrupt conclusion with these words, "Through your commandments I gain understanding; therefore I HATE every lying way." That sure scrapes the butter and the jam and the fruit preserves and the clotted cream of off this particular piece of pastry. Anything that is not of God has no place in the believer's life, and must be to him or her as something utterly loathsome.

This new, post-punishment covenant relationship with God that Jeremiah has prophesied is not all beer and skittles, or tortes and Earl Gray to maintain the metaphor. Remember Horton the Elephant who was faithful 100 percent? Nothing less will do. Faithfulness requires 100% commitment. Anything less would be condemned as mere tokenism.

As cakes go, the Parable of the Unjust Judge and the Poor Widow Woman is deceptive and must be handled with care. It is not as it may seem a parable about prayer. Its moral is not Persistence in Prayer Pays off in the End. If that were the case, each of us should be spinning a Tibetan Prayer Wheel as we sit here this morning even as I speak.

This parable is about faithfulness, about being faithful and remaining faithful no matter how futile it all may seem. It is about seeing God when God cannot be seem, and of living as a faithful witness to God's presence when God does not seem to be present.

Any idea anyone may have that prayer is the opportunity to air some sort of daily Christmas wish list, to a God that closely resembles Santa Claus is missing the mark by a mile.

Notice please that all the woman asks for is justice, nothing more nothing less. Give me justice. And to that she remains as Horton the

Elephant, faithful 100%. She is not asking for any favors. All she wants is what is due to her. Justice!

The image of the judge, a frightening imagine for most of us because we can see only too clearly that this fictional figure of the 1st Century has come to life in reality in our own times and has done so in every generation since the parable and before it. We find such figures in every aspect of life; they surround us on all sides, as do the pitiful heirs of the poor widow as they attempt to gain justice, nothing more.

What we need are a million or so women, poor and rich, to march on Washington weekly until no child goes to bed in this country with an empty belly, and no child, or adult for that matter, is without health insurance. Where are the widows when we need them? Where are those pestering, not to be put off, noisy clamoring widows? God bless them.

I close, of course, with 2 Timothy 3:14–4:5. As cakes go, this is a fancy one. Paul takes everything we have learned up to now, makes it a la mode and puts a cherry on the top. But before you dive in with your fork be aware that this one has a hard center.

Faithfulness to God and God's Word, and fervent prayers of adoration and praise are fine as far as they go, but without witness in life and works they are hollow. Remember Paul's warning about being nothing more than empty vessels, noisy but still empty? Remember too James teaching, "Faith without works is dead." 2:17

Timothy is reminded by Paul in this letter that he is to be steadfast in faith, solidly dependable, utterly reliable, not blown to and fro by every new wind of doctrine and not discouraged in times of darkness. Here is the echo of Jeremiah and of the Psalmist. We are to stay faithful in our witness, and that's in our witness to others – we call that evangelism – as well as in the personal witness of our lives in and out of church. Our faithful commitment to prayer will support and enhance our witness in life. God is never absent from us, clouds and thick darkness notwithstanding, and the true Christian knows and shows this in his or her life.

In the last lines of today's gospel reading Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Perhaps today's cake

review will have helped us better understand Jesus' expectations of us, his faithful people.

Well that's quite enough cake for you for one day. Anymore and you'll spoil you lunch. Amen  
Amen.

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