

*A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the Second Sunday in Lent, in lectionary year C, 28 February 2010. To God be the Glory.*

A couple of weeks ago a friend gave me two volumes of stories about hymns. You'll come to know more and more that hymnody is one of my great loves...I love to sing hymns, I love to read hymns, I love to know about the text's history, and I'm always on the lookout for new hymns set to old tunes. Anyway, I've been relishing these one-page summaries of various hymns the past couple of weeks.

There are hymns with which I grew up that I spent several years discarding. Too evangelical for me, I said in seminary. Too much talk about Jesus, and not enough serious theology, I would say with a cringe of superiority. So I jettisoned all these old-fashioned 19th century hymns, castigating them in favor of so-called more sophisticated texts. It was like spitting out mother's milk, but I did it nonetheless. In the last six years I've rediscovered the goodness of many of these hymns, and these two new books I now have, are providing background on the authors and composers.

*"I love to tell the story of unseen things above of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love*

*"I love to tell the story, for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest; to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love."*

Today's gospel is a story for those of us hungering and thirsting to see Jesus in his humanity. We encounter him in a lament. In the story of his overturning the tables in the temple, we encounter him angry; when Lazarus dies and he weeps, we encounter his sadness. Today it's his lament.

Jesus casts himself in the role of a prophet in his cry over Jerusalem. Prophets point out truths we'd rather not hear or see, and Jesus called for a complete change, from the inside out. The people rejected both the message, and the messenger. They were also aware that he proposed a new focus on the meaning of life. He had a sense of how ancient this quest was, referring to the prophet Isaiah, "I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 5:17; 8:17; 13:35). We know that throughout history cultures have asked questions about the meaning of life. Ancient Israel, the great Greek philosophers, all have considered the deep questions. If your life is ever complicated, then you've asked these deep questions about life's meaning too.

We're tempted, I think, to use our ordinary experience and reason to work out our problems, and to use our strength to hold it together while we do. This morning Jesus introduces a different note—one part a re-emphasizing of the wisdom of the Hebrew prophets, and another part, his own insight into life's meaning.

The ancient part we know: Isaiah, Socrates, Jeremiah, Plato, and the not so ancient: Kant, Hobbes, Kierkegaard, and C.S. Lewis. Christ's insight, however, might mean reminding ourselves of the basic message of the old story of his love, his lament, his anger, his sadness...all the emotions that you feel, he felt; all the passion that you have, he had. That's one insight. Another is that Jesus basically knew he was going to be rejected for speaking truth. Your truth and my truth will at times lead us into paths of righteousness and goodness, and at other times, to the valley of the shadow of death. I think that's a basic truth.

In this passage—one that's not unique to Luke—his friends and foes alike can see what's coming. They know that the strength of Jesus' insight, and his healing love, will lead to a deadly reaction, so they warn him: "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." Here they're referring to the puppet king and nominal Jew, Herod, whose authority came from the occupying Romans. He says, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way.' In other words, from some place deep inside him, he says, "I'm going to take care of business." He says, "listen." So let's listen.

What we hear is the voice of character. We hear someone who is about his business. We hear someone who knows the limits of ordinary human resources. In Jesus we hear a voice that says "there's a place within, a place to which we must turn, partly because it's Lent, partly because it's worship, partly because we're his hands and feet to our neighbors." Turn to a place called faith. It's a well of sorts, whose water is basic trust. It's a place where we contemplate the choices in our lives. For me, it's that place of old-fashioned, evangelical hymnody which beckons me back, and moves me forward.

But sometimes we're not sure we can stand up to life's next challenge, to say, go and tell that fox for me . . . I've got the grace of God in me. I will take care of business. That's what the great prophets did, and in the silence heard the still small voice of God. That's what the Greeks heard in their disciplined, reasoned silence. And that's what Jesus heard. Jesus went to Jerusalem on the strength of that confidence.

Where's your "Jerusalem"? Wherever it is, or whatever it is, or whomever it is, Go and tell that fox: "I have my life to live and my work to do and my faith to test, and God willing, to find."

If we look inside and wait long enough, we'll find faith. This morning it might come from a sense of mystery given at this Altar, or an old hymn that you thought was too simple for your complex theological framework. Maybe it will come from Christ himself who desires to gather us together as a hen gathers her brood under wings. Go there this Lent, to Jesus, and to that old, old story of his love.