

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 21, 2018

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2: Isaiah 47:1–15; Galatians 2:1–10; John 6:41–51

Tonight I want to set aside for the most part the first reading. It's from that part of Isaiah generally known as Second Isaiah. Most scholars date these chapters from the time after the return of the Hebrew people to Jerusalem from the years in exile in Babylon.¹ In the passage we heard, the prophet uses the image of a ruler's daughter who has lost all her family and all of her possessions and has been enslaved. The prophet asserts that the false religion and the wickedness of the people of the city has brought about its destruction by God.

A prophetic image of a fallen Babylon appears also in the Revelation to John, the very last book of the New Testament. In Revelation, "Babylon" was a symbolic name for Rome, the capital of the empire.² Yet how

¹ Martin A. Sweeney, "Isaiah," *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 965.

² *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), n. 2171.

should one understand these prophetic references, old and new?

How God acts, or fails to act, in human history brings us to mysteries we can acknowledge and name—among them the mystery of God, the mystery of life, and the mystery of evil. These remain matters we approach with care and with an awareness that the answers to the greatest questions belong finally to the life of the world to come.

Now the Letter of Paul to the Galatians. Paul is writing in the late 40s or early 50s of the first century of what we call the Christian Era.³ Everything seems simple enough in the passage we heard tonight. Peter was entrusted with the mission to the Jews; Paul was entrusted with the mission to the Gentiles—that is, all those who were not Jewish. But the next verses, which we did not hear, tell us that when Paul and Peter were together in Antioch, Peter stopped eating with the Gentile Christians. Paul would have none of that. He wrote, “But when [Peter] came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.”⁴

³ Sweeney, 2041.

⁴ Galatians 2:11. RSV.

When Paul wrote about Peter refusing to eat with Gentiles, his readers in his time would know that this meant Peter had decided not to share in the ordinary weekly meal of believers, unless they weren't also following Jewish law. Again, Paul would have none of it.

Whenever we gather for the Eucharist, I try to remember that the first Christians gathered weekly for meals, on Saturday night, the Jewish sabbath.⁵ Most of the first Christians, like most people then, were relatively poor rather than relatively prosperous.⁶ Seeing that everyone got to eat real food as well as the Christ's Bread and the Christ's Wine mattered. When more prosperous Christians in Corinth tried to dodge this, Paul wrote to them, "When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat."⁷ Again, in the time of Paul, the Bread and Wine were part of a real meal, where there were readings, prayers, hymns, and teaching, that all could be fed.

⁵ Paul Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 69.

⁶ Andrew Brian McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 38. See also Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 8.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:20.

Things would change dramatically as the church outgrew even large houses. The fellowship meal becomes focused on the bread and the wine.

Beginning in the late 300s, how the food of bread and wine was understood would begin to take on an association with Christ's death—part of the gospel tradition, but not, evidently, in the tradition of their prayers over the bread and wine.⁸ Before then, in the words of Professor Paul Bradshaw, “the focus of their ritual meal was instead on feeding on the life-giving Jesus.”⁹ I try to remember that every time we gather to break the bread and to share the cup.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁸ Bradshaw, 13.

⁹ Paul F. Bradshaw, “The Eucharistic Sayings of Jesus,” *Studia Liturgica* 35 (2005), 11.