

Tuesday in the Fifth Week after the Epiphany

February 9, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year One: Genesis 1:20–2:4a; Psalm 8; Mark 7:1–13

Yesterday, I was a part of a Zoom meeting for a group of Manhattan rectors and academics. We keep two lists of active members. One is for those who will be hosts for lunch, the other for those whose turn it is to make a presentation or read a paper. Father Andrew Mullen, retired rector of Epiphany here in the city, has also for many years been a seasonal chaplain for the Church of England in Europe and elsewhere. There are Episcopal summer chapels, for example, on the Maine coast where people go in the summer. We learned yesterday that to become a chaplain now, the Church of England requires an FBI background check. But before we got to that, we discussed an Ash Wednesday without ashes.

Our bishop has asked that no congregation in our diocese offer the imposition of ashes—the issue being safe distancing. As far as I know, none of the congregations represented on the Zoom will offer ashes. I think the way we minister Communion is safe. Letting people pick up ashes from a small plastic container and putting it on themselves generally seemed ridiculous.

Over the years, I have made peace with the ritual of offering ashes outside of the Eucharist because it seems to meet a need—at least that is my excuse.

I am not good joke teller, but I did get a chuckle from the group when I remarked that this year, our congregations can follow the directions of the appointed gospel for the beginning of Lent from the Sermon on the Mount at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Matthew. His sermon included these words: "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by

your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”¹

Today’s gospel lesson is the beginning of the seventh of sixteen chapters in Mark. Jesus is not in Jerusalem, he is in Gennesaret, a town on the westside of the Sea of Galilee, just south of Capernaum. May I remind you and me that, at the beginning of what we call chapter three, Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. But before he did so, he asked the Pharisees, “Is it permissible to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil, to save life or to kill?”² Of course, Jesus healed him. The episode ends with these words, “And the Pharisees immediately went out with the Herodians and took counsel against Jesus, in order that they might destroy him.”³

Galilee is where Jesus began his ministry. It is where, on the morning of the resurrection, he tells Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome that he will meet his disciples. Galilee is where the poor, the sick, and lame not only welcomed him but followed him. Jerusalem was the place he would suffer, die, and rise. But hardness of heart has already overtaken people who have heard Jesus but not heard him, seen him but not seen him. And today, Jesus quotes Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”⁴

I really do like the collect for this week that we heard today. It was drafted by the late Reverend Dr. Massey Shepherd, the leading Episcopal liturgical scholar of his generation:⁵

¹ Matthew 6:16–18.

² Mark 3:4. Translation: Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 247.

³ Mark 3:6. Translation: Ibid.

⁴ Mark 7:6 (c.f. Isaiah 29:13).

⁵ Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 172.

*Set us free, O God, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of that abundant life which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.*⁶

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

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⁶ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 164, 216.