

Matt Jacobson
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St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

YEAR C, LENT 5, SUNDAY: SOLEMN MASS
ISAIAH 43:14–21*; PSALM 126; PHILIPPIANS 3:8–14; LUKE 20:9–19

Recently, I saw a video of a Ukrainian in Kharkiv playing his cello in the midst of all that destruction. Bombed out buildings everywhere. I believe he was playing Bach. His audience was virtual since there were so few left in the town.

I was struck, in part, by the beauty of his playing in the middle of all that destruction. But, what I really took note of, and remember more vividly, was an interview with him. He was asked whether he thought that at some point his town could be rebuilt?

He said, “yes,” and seemed to have no doubts. The reporter was a little surprised by his confidence and asked how it was possible for him to be so optimistic. His response was that he knows that resurrection comes after death. The reporter didn’t know quite what to do with that response!

Now, it may seem strange, and will require perhaps a bit of explanation, but today’s collect reminds me of the cellist and this insight. In the collect of the day, our opening prayer, we prayed, “Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners” and we went on to ask God to help our hearts to be “fixed where true joys are to be found.”¹

It’s a prayer that sounds perfectly at home in Lent, talking about “unruly wills and affections of sinners.” So, it may be a little surprising that in the prior prayer book, this Lenten-sounding prayer was appointed for the fourth Sunday after Easter.² In the middle of Eastertide.

And, in fact, that’s where it had been at least since the 700s.³ Sort of.

¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, 219.

² *Book of Common Prayer*, 1928, 174.

³ *Gelasian Sacramentary*, 585, where the collect is appointed for *Tertia Dominica post clausum Paschae*, dates to the first half of the eighth century as per Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 180.

In the 17th century, the language was changed in the English Prayer Book.⁴ The original Latin text that's translated into the earlier prayer books asks God to make the minds of the faithful people to be of one will.⁵ It doesn't say anything about those wills being unruly or belonging to sinners. Just becoming of one will.

Having our minds be of one will, and our hearts fixed where true joys are found, fits perfectly well in Easter -- in the context of resurrection -- especially when it's left unmentioned that the reason we need help with our wills is our unruliness and sin.

But, with this added language about sin, I understand why it was ultimately moved to Lent (though, that happened after three hundred years of us Anglicans hearing about the sinfulness and unruliness of our wills during Eastertide and presumably making sense of it all in that context too).

I bring this up not just for an interesting bit of Prayer Book history, but because it also shows how the lines between our seasons are blurry. And, sometimes we need to look across them to get a fuller picture. Our lessons today also capture this sense if we look closely.

We're deep in Lent at this point and our parable from Jesus is clearly pointing us to the Cross. This is where we're headed.

Jesus is already in Jerusalem. He's at the Temple teaching. The leadership, the scribes and the chief priests, we're told, know the parable is about them. They want to lay hands on Jesus, but they are afraid. They're represented in the parable by the tenants who beat and chase away the servants that the vineyard owner sends.

The parable recalls a passage in Isaiah, where the vineyard represents Israel, and so, in a sense, it's speaking about how Israel has mistreated and not listened to the prophets.⁶ Being sinful and unruly.

And then, back to Luke, the owner, sends his "beloved son," who of course represents the Son, to gather his fruit. But, they kill him as well, which brings the Cross to the forefront.

⁴ *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662, 189.

⁵ Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: HarperOne, 1995), 175-176; *Gelasian Sacramentary*, 585.

⁶ Isaiah 5.

A key part of the Isaiah passage that inspired this imagery is that there are only “wild grapes,” -- unruly and sinful grapes, we could say.⁷ And, Isaiah’s vineyard is completely destroyed.⁸

But, in Luke, there isn’t anything about problems with the grapes. This isn’t about completely starting over from scratch. Unique to Luke, compared with Matthew and Mark’s versions, is that the people respond to the parable by saying, “God forbid” or perhaps more literally from the Greek, “let it not be [so].”⁹

Luke is making it clear that the main issue is about the leadership and not all the people. There is good fruit in Israel even if the leadership needs to change.

If we push the metaphor a bit beyond Luke’s likely intent, we could say that there is still good fruit in us, even if our leadership, our will, needs some changing.

But in Luke, he’s looking ahead, beyond the Cross, to his part II, the *Acts of the Apostles*, where he continues to tell his story and focuses on the leaders of the early Church. On what comes next.

Paul, of course, is one of the new leaders that emerges. In the portion of his letter to the Philippians that we read, Paul speaks about the process of knowing Jesus and not yet being perfect. And, these concepts for Paul both seem to relate to his goal of being in Christ.

The Greek word translated as “perfect” is actually a passive verb form, so it has a sense of one being perfected. Paul has not yet been perfected. Paul has not yet been completed. The Greek points towards an end or a conclusion.¹⁰

But, things don’t end with the Cross, as the Ukrainian cellist pointed out. Paul too is talking about a conclusion that’s beyond death.

⁷ Isaiah 5:4.

⁸ Isaiah 5:5-6.

⁹ Luke 20:16.

¹⁰ τελειόω; Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 996.

And, knowing Jesus, being perfected, being found in Jesus, as Paul puts it, all relate to the original Latin text of our collect that asks God to make the minds of the faithful people to be of one will.¹¹ Only then, when we are found in Christ, will we be truly all of one will.

In the meantime, Paul's words encourage us to "press on toward the goal." The goal of knowing Jesus and being perfected in him. Our work begins here and now, but it will only be completed in a part of the mystery that we can't fully comprehend.

In his book *Being Human*, from a couple of years ago, former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams puts some words around this mystery.

He writes that "the human life in which God has made himself most visible, most tangible [that is, Jesus], disappears from the human world in its former shape and is somehow absorbed into the endless life of God. And our humanity, all of it, goes with Jesus."¹²

And, he describes this as "Jesus' humanity taking into it all the difficult, resistant, unpleasant bits of our humanity [we could insert here our unruly wills,] taking them into the heart of love where alone they can be healed" to reach the true potential of our humanity.¹³

Rebuilt, though not from scratch.

This is the goal Paul speaks of us pressing on towards.

Towards the Cross, yes.

But, our work in Lent is also a step towards something beyond: the goal of being perfected, of knowing and being found in Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

¹¹ *Gelasian Sacramentary*, 585.

¹² Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*