

# Sermons at Christ Church

## The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength

Lent V

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Forgetting what lies behind. One of the essential lessons of mindfulness is the goal to let go of the past. This isn't because the past is unimportant, but because we cannot change the past, massage it or reframe it. In other words, we have no control over the past, and so the more we worry about it, the more we needlessly consume ourselves. Since we are vulnerable in the face of our past, the importance of our past then is to offer us a new insight based on what we have come to know and understand about ourselves. The lessons of our past is one of perspective. What new perspective do we have going forward? And what kind of future do we desire to have our new perspective carve for us.

The prophet Isaiah looks to the future of God's restoration, and reminds the returning exiles not to dwell on the bitterness of the exile or the circumstances that led them into the exile: do not remember the past, do not focus on it. He says. The prophet makes this claim not because the past doesn't matter, it matters, but what is its value in comparison to the improbable and amazing things that God is doing? What is the value of our past in relation to the new thing that God is doing in our lives? How does your sins or indiscretions measure up to being restored by God? God is about a new future, one that takes its root from the past but it is not shackled by it. A future that is well-informed by the past but it is not held bondage by it. A future that is shaped by our experience of the past but it is not defined by it.

For the prophet then, the new thing that God is doing was improbable, and yet marvelous in their eyes because they didn't know they will ever be restored. In much the same way, Paul didn't know he needed to be restored until he came by the surpassing value of knowing Christ. And that knowledge was more than enough for him to set aside his past, give up his costly heritage and embrace God's future for him. The question then is, how can you see or feel the full effects of your restoration if you are still trapped in the past? God's future offers more than a new opportunity, it offers a new perspective.

The reality of a new perspective is that we cannot make the same mistakes of the past. I remember the Sunday after my one year anniversary, a parishioner walked up to me after worship and said, "Well you know, Fr. Manny, you are now one year into your ministry with us and so you can no longer rely on the excuse that you didn't know. Our expectation is that you now know all that you need to know about us." I was taken aback a little because I wasn't aware that my response of not knowing something was considered to be an excuse. The gift within this conversation was that this parishioner gave me something to think about, a new perspective if you will. And that is, if mistakes of the past year was tolerable, same mistakes going forward may not be as much tolerable or at least I cannot rely on the excuse of I didn't know. Our reality is one where we may get some slack if we do not know, but when we come to know, we set aside our ignorance and look towards a future that is built on what we have come to know.

The point is not so much about how terrible we have been in the past, nor is it about how sinful we have been, it is about whether we are willing to pour on Jesus' feet all that we may have acquired over the years, stuff which is costly to give up because it commands such an incredible value in our lives. But we have to give them up any way.

The reality is that it is easy to give up that which has little to no value to us. But we hate to lose the stuff which has significant value because to lose that would mean losing our concocted sense of self-importance.

Either good or bad, we hate to give up that which is costly. We hate to give up stuff that we believe we desperately need to hold on to. For some of us it is too costly to give up our sins because those sins have come to define who we are, and the more we wallow in it, the more satisfaction we derive from it. For some of us it is costly to give up our wealth because it has become our security. For some of us it is costly to give up on our sense of pride because what else do we have if we lose our pride? For many of us it is costly to give up our time for service because we have come to believe that time is money and we should make as much money as we can with the time that we have. We hate to give up anything because it will cost us something. But the flipside is that our future, God's future with us depends on our ability to give up those things which are costly. God's future offers more than a new opportunity, it offers a new perspective.

Talk about a new perspective of Paul. A man who was defined by the covenantal relationship of his heritage. A Hebrew born of Hebrews. A man who descended from the tribe of Hebrew kings. A man who had spent all his years studying the law and was considered blameless under the law. A man whose zeal for the traditions of his people was beyond fanatical. A man whose obsession with his faith was such that he was willing to persecute others for the sake of that faith.

Paul had everything to lose. His identity was his perfume. But Paul was willing to set aside his rich history and heritage, and like Mary who took a pound of perfume and poured it on Jesus' feet, giving up such costly perfume, Paul gave up on all that he had come to know and love about his faith.

In his words, he proclaims, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my lord. That is to say that whatever it is that I have come to know about Jesus surpasses any that I have ever known. For that reason, I lose the memory of the past, and strive towards the future, not my future but God's future with me, the future that offers me a new perspective. A perspective that is not rooted in the righteousness that comes from the law but the righteousness that comes from the faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul gave up that which was costly for him, and that was his identity and his entire life. If we don't give up that which is costly for us, how can we then be used by God? If we don't sow in tears how can we reap with joy? That which we must give up for the sake of knowing Christ should cost us something.

What fascinates me about the story of Mary in today's gospel is that her act echoes what Paul said many years thereafter-I lose all for the sake of knowing Christ Jesus. I set all aside for the sake of knowing Christ. I relinquish the past for the sake of knowing Jesus. I give all up, even that which is costly for the sake of knowing Christ. And so the question for our consideration this morning is, what do you know about Christ? What have you given up or willing to give up for the sake of knowing Christ? And are you willing to embrace God's future with you?

There's a story of a treasure buried in a field. And the man who found it went and through sheer joy, sold everything he had and bought that field. Yes, the surpassing value of knowing Christ not only makes us a treasure that God values, yearns for and always seeks to restore, but it calls on us to set aside our past and embrace God's future of a union with us. A union in which God is as much our treasure as we are His treasure. Amen.