

A Homily preached by
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“We are all ‘Resident Aliens’.”
First Sunday in Lent Year C
February 17, 2013
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
Romans 10:8b-13
Luke 4:1-13

This Lent we should be very conscious of eating, what we eat, yes, but also where and with whom. By doing so we can stand in solidarity with people from every walk of life. We stand with all those who are hungry – hungry for food, but also those who hunger for shelter or peace or dignity or recognition or those who hunger for love. We are called to action this Lent. Instead of focusing on our own piety, on what we choose to give up or whatever discipline we decide to embrace on our Lenten journey, we cannot neglect our responsibilities for justice and righteousness in our communities – in our country – within the church – and those outside our doors.

This first Sunday of Lent we have a glimpse of how the ancients were called to action – how the Israelites tried to practice their calls to faithfulness. Specifically they were called by Yahweh to give thanks and the Deuteronomist explained exactly how to give proper thanks.

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

The Book of Deuteronomy is a 7th century BC document. We may find Deuteronomy boring and repetitive. It is. Much of the Bible is repetitive – the Old and the New Testaments all repeat themselves with good reason. To us 21st century people it makes reading the Bible difficult and hard to appreciate. But for the ancients, 700 years before the birth of Christ and even after the gift of Jesus’s birth. It was not just a literary style, but a means of making Scripture understood. The gifts are reciprocal. God gives and then they – and we – are to give in return. The land was the gift from God. Those who received such a gift were obliged to offer back to God first fruits – in a specific place, in a specific manner – with specific words. Even the words the Israelites were to say when giving thanks were exactly scripted.

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me.

This Lent – and every Lent – we are wandering Arameans – we are on a journey – a journey toward the Easter feast – a feast where everyone should be and may be and can be fed. What if we were to use the ancient Book of Deuteronomy as a model for action this Lent. We have received the gift of Jesus at Christmas, we have celebrated the gift of light in Epiphany, and now we turn to the gift of our lives and our mortality. All these gifts are from God, and we are called to give back the gifts. In thanksgiving we are to give them back to God and give them for the furtherance of God’s gifts to others.

The exact nature of the gift the Israelites were to offer was also spelled out precisely. Proper gifting included giving to those who could not fend for themselves. First the Israelites were to give so that the Levites could survive. These were landless holy ones who could not care for themselves without help. And then there were the aliens – strangers, immigrants who had come to Israel for safety and sustenance. It could be that these aliens were driven from their homes by war or famine.

Who are the aliens among us? Canada is a nation of immigrants. Most have come for a better life. We may know first generation Canadians, but you rarely meet a Calgarian who was born right here in Calgary. We are a diverse people in this country closely connected to the lands we came from – close to our heritage.

So again, let us ask who are the aliens among us? I am rereading some of my favorite – tried and true – books this Lent. *Resident Aliens* is among my short list of beloved books. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon are just two of the Christian thinkers I will be journeying with this year. In *Resident Aliens* they speak to today’s world where we Christians are the aliens. The church is a colony – a holy nation – a people – a family of believers living in a world where Christianity and Christian values have been devalued. In our parents’ day being a Christian was a given. Everyone – well nearly

everyone – went to church on Sunday. That is not where we are today. Hauerwas and Willimon would say that Christendom has fallen. They then say that “fall” is a good thing. They say that “What we call ‘church’ is too often a gathering of strangers who see the church as yet another ‘helping institution’ to gratify further their individual desires” (p. 138). What we Christians should be doing, they say, is offering an alternative – a new perspective – a Christian perspective – on everything from politics to power, from finances to service and everything in between. If we were to merge *Resident Aliens* with Deuteronomy, we are to use our gifts for others rather than ourselves. Living our Christian virtues in the modern world should be the best expression of a real thanksgiving, receiving our gifts yet giving back our gifts for God’s use, and surely not for our own gratification. We are to give back for others for God’s sake, not for our own.

Yet again, who are the aliens in our day? Who among us is hungry?¹ In the last decade in Canada the working poor – people with jobs but who still cannot sustain life alone – constitute the 2nd largest group of food bank clients, and the number of working poor seems to still be going up every year. In 1989 the federal government made an all-party resolution to end child poverty, and yet 5 years ago the children under 18 still represented over 37% of food bank recipients – that is the same level as 1989. Families with children make up more than 50% of recipients. Another segment of hungry aliens are our seniors who make up 6% of food recipients. And single parent family households represent more than 27% of the total assisted by food banks.

Aliens – the wandering Arameans among us – may be here for a brief time or for a lifetime? An appropriate thanksgiving for God’s gifts of land and its wonderful bounty is to share our bounty with the immigrants in our midst. Immigrants are to eat their fill. A full thanksgiving to God means that all must be full. If anyone is hungry then God’s gifts have not been used well, and thanksgiving is incomplete. There must be justice for all.

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

¹ **Statistics** reported here are from HungerCount 2008, according to Statistics Canada,