

TITLE: “Selling All to Christ”

No one wants to be known as a sellout, but life is hard, and you have to make a living. The idea of a sellout, someone who changes their style or their political message in order to make a dollar or to save their career, is as old as Adam. There once was a king in Israel named Ahab, and he was a sellout of a different kind, a spiritual sellout you might say. One day, as king Ahab was walking along the grounds of his palace in the valley of Jezreel, he noticed something that deeply troubled him. He didn't have a vegetable garden. How could a king's palace be complete without a vegetable garden? But, where should it be planted? There's simply no more room on the palace grounds.

Ahab surveyed the property around the palace and found that there was a vineyard owned by a man named Naboth right next door. This vineyard would do perfectly well for his vegetable garden. So, Ahab went to Naboth with an offer that he surely could not refuse: sell me your vineyard for market price, or in exchange for another more valuable vineyard in a different part of town. But Naboth was not interested in selling his family land. “This land has been in my family for generations”, Naboth replies, “to sell it to you would profane the name of the Lord, who gave this land to the children of Israel.” Ahab was a wicked king, who had corrupted the worship of the true God by setting up idols to the Caananite gods in the high places to appease his wicked wife Jezebel.

When Naboth refused to become a sellout to Ahab, the Scriptures say, Ahab went home and pouted like a spoiled child, and when his servants tried to get him to eat food, he turned his face away. So, his wicked wife sprang into action. After chastising her husband for not behaving like a king, Jezebel wrote letters to the town council and had them raise up two false witnesses, who accused Naboth of cursing God and the king. Naboth was swiftly condemned and executed by stoning, and Ahab was happy again. He went down to survey what would become his new vegetable garden. But of course, the prophet of God, Elijah, the “enemy of Israel” as Ahab liked to call him, was already there in the vineyard to ruin Ahab’s celebration. When Ahab saw him he said, “O my enemy, how did you find me?” Elijah replies: “I have found you because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the Lord.” Elijah prophesies that soon the dogs would lick up the blood of Ahab in the same place where they had licked up the blood of Naboth, and within a short time the prophecy comes true.

The language Elijah uses is important. When Ahab decided to shed innocent blood for the sake of a piece of ground, Elijah said, he “sold himself to do evil in God’s sight.” Today Christ is teaching us that to be grateful to God for his abundant provision is to sell ourselves to God in daily sacrifices of prayer and love, but to complain, to be discontent, to become envious of our neighbor’s success is to sell ourselves into bondage to an evil life.

How else do we show our gratitude to God than by prayer, both private and public? Today is Rogation Sunday, a day set apart for prayer and preparation for celebrating the Feast of the Ascension this Thursday. The word “rogation” comes from the Latin verb which means “to ask.” In our lesson from St. John’s Gospel, we heard that, “JESUS said unto his disciples, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.” Christ is about to ascend into heaven. He is going his way to the Father from whence he was eternally begotten. He goes away, but as we heard last week, this is a good thing. Indeed, he goes to intercede for us, to plead for us, to show his wounds to the Father, to show his deep love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.

That’s what Christ goes to heaven to do. To say sweet and wonderful things to the Father about each of you. You know that he could say much less, and indeed, he could say terrible things about each of us. He could read out the record of every thought and intent of our heart, each time we hated our brother or sister or mother or father, and each time we lusted after those to whom we were not married, and even worse, the secret faults that we will admit to no one, some of which we have purposefully suppressed, putting up an inward wall of defense, so that we pretend they never happened, and if we are truly children of God, there are memories that

fill us with disgust whenever something brings them to mind. Christ could reveal all of that, and it would be true and just, but instead he lives to intercede for us, as often as we offer up our prayers in his name.

Knowing this, who would not want to give all of their time and attention to God? Christ has paid for your life with his most precious life, and now he lifts up your life, which is owned by him, to the Father, making it once again, clean and pure and holy in his sight, uniting your soul with him, so that he dwells in you and you in him. Christ lives to intercede for you. That means, he is interceding for you now. He interceded for you yesterday and the day before, and the day before that, crying out to the Father as he cried from the cross, saying, "Father forgive them." What were you doing in the hour that Christ was interceding for you? Were you giving thanks? Were you grateful in your heart? Were you making excuses for neglecting to pray to him or to meditate on his holy word, whereby he promises to give you all things? Your life and mine was bought with a price infinitely more valuable than it was worth, and yet we are tempted to sellout, to use our great abundance and freedom as an excuse to do nothing for God's kingdom.

The ironic thing about the Christian life, is the great exchange that God has made for us. He is not like Ahab, who steals a life in order to gain a field, but quite the reverse. The Son of God sold himself that he might purchase an adulterous bride, a bride who the prophets say is always wandering after other partners, other gods,

burning with a desire to serve the thing that she makes with her own hands. In him, we have both life and an example of true living. If we want to know God, to truly experience who he is, that he is real, that he comes to us in the inner core of our being, and that he dwells in us, conquering all fear in us as Christ has conquered the world. If you want to see God, then do the works of God, and you will see God in your works. That is how we overcome the temptation to serve our own works, to sell ourselves for silver and gold. We overcome that temptation, the more we long to see God in our works. By prayer we overcome the world, because by prayer we are united to Christ Jesus who has overcome the world. If we want to know God, then we must follow the example of Christ, by returning all to God in prayer, in thanksgiving, and in righteousness of life.

But, you might wonder, why are we hearing about thanksgiving on Rogation Sunday? This is the Sunday for asking. Isn't thanksgiving something you do later in the year, after the crops have been harvested? Well, I think we've already answered this question when we talked about Christ's intercession for us. Christ says, "At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you; for the Father himself loveth you, because ye have loved me, and have believed that I came out from God." Christ says that the mere mention of his name by those who love him, those who believe in him, those who offer all in return to him, who sell all to His Almighty Goodness. Those will receive gifts from him immediately.

There won't be any lag time in heaven, as if there were some sort of heavenly bureaucracy, in which the Father waits for the Son to come to the celestial board meeting and read out the whole list of requests that people have given him. That's not how Christ's intercession works. As He said in our New Testament lesson, if we will only ask the Father in the name of Jesus, then the Father will give us his own spirit, the Holy Spirit of God.

Truly, God does not wait around to give us what we need. And yet, he does wait for us to ask for it. God's provision is always immediate to those who have given their whole self to him with grateful hearts – and I'm using “gratitude” here as a synonym for “selling all” to God because that is what “gratitude” means, “thanks-giving”, “gratiam ago” in Latin, a free gift expecting nothing in return because we have given all, and those who give all are no longer alive because they have given all, even their lives. God's provision is always immediate to those who have given their whole life, soul and body, to him. We first gave our whole life to him when we were baptized, then again when we chose to own our baptism at confirmation, and more recently when we returned our lives to God in Holy Communion, also known as the Eucharist, which is the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” What better gift could we bring to the altar of God but the holy mystery of the body and blood of his own Son? Christ promises to be present in that holy meal, so that by faith we can witness his holy heavenly intercession for us,

uniting heaven and earth, as he offers all of himself, as we offer all of ourselves, pouring out all of his humanity and divinity before the Father, so that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

That is why we are to be constantly thankful, a constant Eucharistic people, because God is constantly giving us all things in Christ Jesus, as long as we consistently ask him for all things. As he says in the psalms, “14 Offer unto God thanksgiving, * and pay thy vows unto the Most Highest. 15 And call upon me in the time of trouble; * so will I hear thee, and thou shalt praise me.” And as St. Paul says, “16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” In everything give thanks, for this is your spiritual sacrifice, your eucharistic sacrifice, where you lift up, not your own hands, and the works of your own doing, but you lift up to God the blessed and holy heart of Jesus Christ, and you say, “Lord I know that you have given me all things in your Son Jesus, and I come to you, though I am a sinner, I come, as one who believes in the cleansing power of his blood. Lord, I come and I ask, how long? How long, O Lord, until you turn and show some mercy upon me? My God, I am surrounded on all sides by temptations and trials, many of which I’ve brought on myself. Holy Jesus, lover of sinners, draw near unto me, for you have said ‘Ask and it shall be given unto you, seek, and ye shall find, knock and the door shall be opened unto you. O Thou who are the Door, by which the sheep enter into eternal life, let

me enter in now, my Lord and my God, let me enter into thy joy and that it might never leave me.”

But, the skeptic will protest. If we're supposed to be grateful, in seedtime and harvest, because we have sold ourselves to a good Master and the only good way of life, and if the Father gives us what we ask for immediately, then why does that prayer we just prayed sound so desperate? Why does the business of prayer often feel so repetitive? I wake up in the morning. I pray for God to give me health. I don't get health. I go to bed. I wake up in the morning. I pray for God to give me health, etc. etc. etc. Day after day, week after week, I do this, and there's no result. What should we say to the skeptic? What did Jesus say to the man who had sat by the pool of Siloam for decades, waiting for the day that he might just touch the water and be healed? Or the leper, who was tormented in isolation for years? When he stretched out his hand to Jesus, he said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." And Jesus said, "I am willing, be clean."

St. John Chrysostom says, "God sees into the hearts of those who pray. What need then, someone will say, that we should ask God for what we need? Does He not know already what we need? Why then should we pray? God does indeed know what things we need, and with generosity provides all we need for the refreshment of our bodies, and since He is good He sends down His rains upon the just and the unjust alike, and causes His sun to shine upon the good and the bad (Mt. v. 45), even

before we ask Him. But faith, and the power of virtue, and the kingdom of heaven, these you will not receive unless you ask for them in labouring and steadfastness. We must first long for these things. [We must be desperate for these things, we must despair if we live without them]. Then when you desire them, you must strive with all your heart to obtain them, seeking them with a sincere heart, with patience, and with faith, not being condemned by your conscience, as praying without attention or without reverence, and so in time, when God wills, you will obtain your request. For He knows better than you when these things are expedient for you. And perhaps He is delaying in giving them to you, by design, in order to keep your attention fixed upon Him; and also that you may know that this is a gift of God, and may safeguard with fear what is given to you. For what we come by with much labour we are zealous to defend; as losing it we lose also our labour; and treating lightly the gift of God we become unworthy of life eternal.”

Beloved, God never delays in answering our prayers. Prayer itself is a gift when spoken in sincerity and truth. Even when God does not seem to answer, he is answering. By keeping us daily on our knees, he is keeping our hearts attentive to what is most important, and most real, because eternal. What things do we work ourselves to the bone to get in this life, and yet we won't pray because we don't believe there is any benefit in repetitive, spiritual labor? How much time do we spend trying to win the affections of lovers and friends? How many days do we sacrifice

ourselves to a corporation or business just to ensure that our retirement will be secured? And yet we won't spend more than a few moments of each day in prayer, if that, as if the reward of eternal retirement was not much much greater.

Today Christ is calling us to sell our all to Him, so that in giving him all, he can return us to ourselves, no longer broken and wayward and unsatisfied, but filled with the fullness of God. As we prepare for the Ascension on Thursday where we will offer up the sacrifice of the holy Eucharist, holy thanksgiving, let us renew our gratitude together, not looking for an immediate material result of our prayer, but an immediate spiritual one. Let us turn to the Payer of the Thanksgiving found on p. 19. of the Book of Common Prayer and offer up, not only the words of our lips, but our lives to the God who made us and washed us in the blood of his Son. Let us pray.