

From this week's Epistle, from the Letter of St. Paul the Apostle to the Galatians:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. Galatians 5:1a

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I want to lay out before you three apparently unrelated ideas. And, after we've looked a bit at all three, I want us to think about what the Fourth Sunday in Lent, what Mothering Sunday, teaches us about how we can live the very best life possible by putting our hope and our trust where we ought to.

The first idea that I want to lay before you has to do with a chronic health crisis that we very seldom ever hear about; which is dehydration. It's a complicated business; how the body regulates fluid levels. On one hand it seems incredibly simple: when we're thirsty, we drink. But there are a lot of other things happening; and one of the challenges arises from the fact that we so often mis-read the impulse. More often than not, we think that we're hungry when our body is telling us that we're thirsty. So, rather than getting something to drink we instead get something to eat.¹ Which can sometimes make us even thirstier than we were when we started; and can, as you might imagine, lead to a whole host of other health problems.

The second concept that I want to lay out before you is something called Phantom Syndrome.² As you may know, it's something that can be experienced by a person who's undergone the amputation of a limb; and it's a sensation that feels like it's coming from a limb that's no longer there. Sometimes that sensation can be pain; sometimes it can be completely painless; but imagine what it would be like to try to scratch that itch that isn't there; imagine how intensely agonising that would be. It's hard to imagine if you've never had the experience, but it likely comes from the process that the brain goes through to re-map the nervous system after surgery. It's a kind of vestigial memory; something left behind on our central nervous system. A reminder of the ways things used to be.

The final apparently unrelated idea that I want to lay before you comes from the mind of C.S. Lewis; who invites us to see our innate longing for happiness and love and joy not just as the result of chemical impulses in our brains but as 'echoes of Eden';³ as memories printed in our very nature; memories of the original image in which we were made, unsullied by disobedience and sin. And to imagine those unlooked for, unasked for, moments of peace and joy and contentment that happen from time to time, without warning, as little windows into the peace and joy and contentment of God's love; as memories of where we all come from; and where we all hope to go to, in Christ. Three different ideas; three different images that I'll come back to in just a moment.

¹ <https://www.seattletimes.com/life/wellness/hunger-vs-thirst-are-you-eating-when-you-should-be-drinking/>

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2022/01/27/1076089390/thirsty-heres-how-your-brain-answers-that-question>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2467458/>

[https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-04359-](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-04359-5.epdf?sharing_token=kXrtZrFvVtPaol2FMWgcGNRgN0jAjWel9jnR3ZoTv0PbmjxpWuAG5sPz3rOY4hteZN8jEW8GFQfGRSlajMfmCMWVZzrTsiL5sTMFHlqnCAUnup_j_odJbr0NrB8yc81UDnmCmCVkS_eZYrcAJK5V/MESGfc0iVWpadDm3LK4EfMsBiDsxBMMWtxE3hMbCsj7FHvh51g00n05vE)

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<https://www.annfamned.org/content/annalsfm/14/4/320.full.pdf>

² <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/phantom-pain/symptoms-causes/syc-20376272>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phantom_limb#:~:text=A%20phantom%20limb%20is%20the,missing%20limb%20is%20still%20attached.

³ <https://www.cslewis.com/echoes-of-eden/>

Now, it's a bit of a shame, I think, that the Gospel passage appointed for Mothering Sunday, the story of Christ feeding the five thousand, stops where it does. It stops just after the miracle has concluded; when that massive crowd of people have eaten their fill; as they sit there both contented and amazed. But what it doesn't tell us is what happened next; what happened right after all the crumbs and crusts had been gathered up; when Jesus took off as quickly as he could; when Jesus got away from that crowd because he was sure that, as John tells us, they were about to make him king. Which initially sounds like a great idea; until we realise that it would have upset everything. It was a temptation that he'd wrestled with previously; when he fought with Satan in the wilderness; a temptation to look for a path to glory that did not involve the Cross; to follow a road to glory that did not involve suffering and sacrifice and torture and death. He'd already rejected that self-serving path at the start of his ministry; that road to an inevitable dead end; and he rejected it again after the miracle of the loaves and fish.

And the reason why it's a shame that we don't hear that part of the story in this week's Gospel is because it reminds us that no matter how great God's gifts to us are, we are instinctively wired to want more; to want something else. That's what I meant when I spoke of the way in which we so often mis-read our sense of thirst. Our body tells us that we need one thing, and we try to answer that need with something else. Our body tells us that we need water but, instead, we offer it a cheeseburger. Jesus offers them bread but they're looking for political revolution; for a political kingdom won by violence and war. Jesus offers us freedom from sin and death but we're looking for freedom from responsibility and mutual sacrifice; for the false freedom to do whatever we want whenever we want as we want without any thought at all for the impact that the exercise of that freedom will have on others. And all of that reminds me of that itch that we all have within our souls; that memory of a long-lost garden that's hard-wired into our nature. We all have that need for the peace and joy and contentment and love for which we were made; which humanity has lost through disobedience and sin.

St. Paul writes of that in this week's Epistle as Jerusalem, as the spiritual mother or us all; not the earthly city of bricks and mortar; of violence and oppression; but the heavenly city: the city of eternal love and joy. And in one way or another, every day of our lives, that's what we're all looking for. But the tragedy is that we look to answer that need, to scratch that itch, to quench that thirst and fill that hunger, with the kinds of things that only leave us thirstier and hungrier. We crave the bread of heaven; we crave the love of God in Jesus Christ, but we instead fill ourselves with everyday bread; with things that seem to satisfy us for the moment but quickly leave us looking for something else. We give up the freedom that Christ has won for us; and we enslave ourselves all over again to the kinds of things that have no lasting value.

So Mothering Sunday isn't really about bread. Or fish. Or any of the countless things we look to to feed our bodies. It's about life; abundant life; of life lived to its fullest because it looks to Christ to fill all its needs. It's about filling all the empty corners of our lives because Christ is at the centre. And it's about the freedom that we have in Christ not to be slaves of any of those things that will satisfy our cravings for only a moment but leave us hungrier than we were when we started.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has set [you] free