

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning. Welcome to morning prayers at the Memorial Church. I invite you please to join me in reciting Psalm 46 in your black psalter. Please rise as you are able.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Congregation:

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.

Congregation:

There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of tabernacle of the most High.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

God is in the midst of her. She shall not be moved. God shall help her, and that right early.

Congregation:

The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved; he uttered his voice, the earth melted.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

Congregation:

Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolation he hath made in the earth.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth. He breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder. He burneth the chariot in the fire.

Congregation:

Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth..

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, beginning at the 13th verse.

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the lights of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one, after lighting a lamp, puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your father in heaven. Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Here endeth the lesson.

Today in the church calendar of my communion and in the Roman calendar as well I think, we remember Leo the Great. Pope St. Leo the Great. One of two bishops of Rome, or popes, who was called great. I'll talk about that in a minute.

Leo was born in the year 400 to an aristocratic family in Rome, and he was made Bishop of Rome in 440. He was elected by the people of Rome. It's the way they did it back then. And it was not a good time in Rome. Rome was in decline. The capital had already been moved to Constantinople. There was famine and poverty, refugees fleeing into the city all the time, escaping both the Vandals and the Huns who were closing in. He's well-known for turning back, in fact, Attila the Hun from Rome in 452. Attila the Hun came right to the walls of the city, and Leo sent an embassy to Attila. No one knows quite why, but Attila got up and turned around, took his armies with him, and Rome was not sacked.

He's known mostly for two things, and called great mainly for two things. The first is for consolidating his own authority as the Bishop of Rome. He had arguments with other senior bishops in the church. We have letters of him corresponding with the Patriarch of Alexandria and other patriarchs, convincing them that they were inferior to him. There's one famous argument, the patriarch of Alexandria, that church roots itself to St. Mark the traditional author of the Gospel. So the Patriarch of Alexandria said, "Look, I've got Mark on my side." And Leo said, "I have Peter on my side." And who is more important, Peter or Mark?

The emperor at the time, Theodosius II, was the first to call the Bishop of Rome, Leo, the Patriarch of the West. This is a title that remains. It's used to refer to the Bishop of Rome now. And during Leo's time the word pope, which previously had been used to refer to any bishop, began to be used to refer specifically and only to the Bishop of Rome. The first thing that Leo is known for is for making popes, for being the Pope.

Second thing is Mark's obscure perhaps, but also maybe more influential. He wrote a letter, which is now called The Tome of Leo, to the Bishop of Constantinople. In it he defined the nature of Christ. This had been a theological controversy that had been raging in Christianity for centuries. He said that in Christ there is a union in one person, two natures without confusion or separation, divine and human. This became the definition that the Council of Chalcedon accepted a few years later, and became the definition that Christians across the globe, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, share.

In a real way, Christianity as we know it today, is not possible without Leo. Both politically in the authority he conferred to Rome, and theologically in the definition he gave to Christ. We have this passage from the Sermon On the Mount today, and the second part of it, where Jesus says, "I have come not to abolish but fulfill," has always landed oddly for me. Because in the Sermon On the Mount, before this moment, he makes all these claims where he says, "You have heard it was said, but I say to you." It sounds a lot like he's abolishing stuff.

I think the way we can understand his sense of fulfillment in this passage comes from the previous verses about letting one's light shine. Don't put your lamp under a bushel basket. Because there's a particular version of shining light that Jesus defines. He says, "Let your good works go before others."

The truth is the law still waits for its fulfillment, for its accomplishment. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, has said, I think rightly, that you couldn't imagine a person playing a Bach cello concerto so well and so beautifully that you never wanted to hear it again, that it would be the last time, that Bach was just done. There's just no end to Bach, however well or expertly that concerto is played.

When Jesus says the law is not yet accomplished, I think he is saying something similar. You will never honor God so well today that you needn't do so tomorrow. You will never love your neighbor so fully today, that you can forget about her tomorrow. Do your good works. Let your light shine. Not because doing so fulfills the law, but because the beautiful demands of the law are inexhaustible, as inexhaustible as God, and they invite us into ongoing relationship.

Leo was great. He earned that name. And few have done more to shape our faith. But our faith is not done. His was not the last word on Christianity. There is no last word, except the word made flesh who beckons us still to follow him, and to keep his commandments, and to let our light shine.

I invite you please to rise for the prayers.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Oh Lord our God, grant that your church, following the teaching of your servant, Leo of Rome, may hold fast the great mystery of our redemption, and adore the one Christ true God and true man. Neither divided from our human nature, nor separate from your divine being, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the holy spirit. One God now and forever. Amen.

And now let us join in saying the words that Jesus taught us. Praying.

Congregation:

Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory. Forever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please join in singing our hymn, number 360.

Congregation:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church and to Christ Jesus. Forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.