

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to our last service of Morning Prayers for this fall term, and the last service of 2023 here in the Appleton Chapel of our Memorial Church.

I invite you please to rise and join in sing our responsorial Psalm, which is number 25.

To you, O God, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you; let me not be humiliated, nor let my enemies triumph over me.

Congregation:

Let none who look to you be put to shame; let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Show me your ways, O God, and teach me your paths.

Congregation:

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; in you have I trusted all the day long.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Remember, O God, your compassion and love, for they are from everlasting.

Congregation:

Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness, O God.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Gracious and upright are you; therefore you teach sinners in your way.

Congregation:

You guide the humble in doing right and teach your ways to the lowly.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

All your paths are love and faithfulness to those who keep your covenant and your testimonies.

Congregation:

Let integrity and uprightness preserve me for my hope has stayed in you.

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John, beginning at the 56th verse.

"Jesus said, 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood, abide in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that, which your ancestors ate and they died, but the one who eats this bread will live forever.' Jesus said these things while he was teaching in a synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it they said, 'This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?'" Here ends the lesson.

Today on our Calendar of Saints, we remember a 2nd century Saint named Clement of Alexandria. Clement was born Titus Flavius Clemens around the year 150. He may have been born in Athens or Alexandria in Egypt. We're not sure which place. And he died around 215 in Jerusalem. So he's a very early Christian, just generally, let alone Christian Saint. Just for context, he was born in 150. The Gospel of John, we think was written in 100 or 110, so he's within a couple of generations, maybe even only one generation, of a community that was still writing gospels about Jesus.

We don't know a lot about Clement. His parents were almost certainly adherents of one of the Roman mystery religions, what we call now the mystery religions, because he writes very knowledgeably about their secret rights in his writings. We know that wherever he was born, he traveled extensively. We know he went to Athens and studied there. He went to Jerusalem and studied there. And he did it deliberately to learn about the various religions of the Mediterranean world. Eventually he arrived in Alexandria, where there was a small catechetical school. It was a school to train Christians to become Christians, and he studied there, and he was ordained a priest in the year 189. He became the teacher of a man who became the most influential early Christian thinker, a man named Origen. And Clement himself is widely regarded as the first theologian, the first person who systematically tried to think through the teachings of Jesus.

Only three works of Clement survive in any significant way. It's interesting to note just how open and generous his theology was in the late 2nd century. He's one of the only folks from this period in early Roman culture, or Roman culture at this time, early Christian culture, to speak about Buddhism. He talks about Buddhism in India. He also spoke about Paul's teaching, that in Christ there is no male or female, and so he has argues for the full inclusion of women in the church and in ministry in the late 2nd century. And beyond this, even is very comfortable speaking in what today we would call fluid terms about gender. He writes that the Eucharist is the milk from the breast of the Father, and that Christ Himself is the breast of the Father. These ideas in the late 2nd century tell of his openness and his generosity, even at this early stage of the church's life.

A contemporary scholar of Clement writes that in reading his theology, you can see that Clement loves God's creation and sees it as good. Clement gives us a warm, joyous picture of life. He is richly human, sane, and moderate. These virtues, human, sane, and moderate, I'm sorry to say, are not typical ones of Christian theology. But then, sanity is sort of in the eye of the beholder.

Jesus today comes into the space of teaching and says, "You must eat my flesh and drink my blood." And the disciples say, "This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?" The scandal of that teaching has lost some of its bite the last 2000 years, even for me, who has a fairly high theology of Eucharist. But the problem of how to deal with the scandal of Christianity remains. Sell all you have and give it to the poor. This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it? Judge no one lest you be judged. This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it? Bless those that curse you. Forgive 70 times 7. If someone strikes you on the left cheek, offer your right. These teachings are difficult. Who can accept them? Love your enemy. This teaching is difficult. Who can accept it?

Clement was and is widely regarded as the first theologian in the Christian religion. And if there's a gift of this discipline that I also share, that discipline of being a theologian, a gift of this impossible and impossibly hubristic field of study that claims to speak God's truth to others; if there's a gift to theology, it's that we try to embrace the scandal of Jesus. We take these nonsensical things, or we ought to, these things that Jesus says, and we try to make them understandable, livable. I think theology at its worst domesticates these teachings. Prunes them of their scandal, so that these teachings can become palatable to the lives we already live. But at its best, theology, like Clements, at its best, theology imagines our lives transformed. Transformed in such a way that these impossible teachings come somehow to be reasonable. Transformed in such a way so that the world, as it is, is revealed as far less than human, sane, or moderate.

Insofar as Clement establishes this tradition for us, we owe him our thanks this day, and our memory on this final day of our fall term.

I invite you please to rise for the prayers.

The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

Also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Oh, God of unsearchable wisdom, you gave your servant Clement grace to understand and to teach the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. Grant your church the same grace to discern your word wherever truth is to be found. Through Jesus Christ, our unfailing light, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And now we pray the words Jesus taught us, saying...

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 closing hymn, number 109.

(singing)

Before the blessing, I just want to thank you all for your faithfulness to this community this term. Not just to the choral fellows, but also to all of you who come each day. We look forward to seeing you in the spring term. But there's one person's faithfulness that I want to commend to all of you this morning. Courtney Godwin, who is out there somewhere, has been a part of this church for a year and a half. This

is her last Morning Prayer service with us this morning. So can we give her a round of applause to tell her how much we love her?

We're going to miss you, Courtney. And now, in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God, and the blessing of the Holy Spirit be with you this day and always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.