

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Audience:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to the Appleton Chapel here in our Memorial Church for our daily service of morning prayers. I invite you please to rise and join in our responsorial psalm, which is number 103 in your black psalter. Bless the Lord, oh my soul, all my being, his holy name.

Audience:

Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and do not forget all of his values.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

He forgives all your sins, heals all your diseases.

Audience:

He redeems your life from the pit, surrounds you with steadfast love and mercy.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord executes righteous acts and judgments for all who are wronged.

Audience:

He made known his ways unto Moses, his deeds to the children of Israel.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding and steadfast love.

Audience:

He will not contend forever, forever his anger for all time.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor has he requited us according to our iniquities.

Audience:

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is [inaudible 00:04:49] for those who fear him.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

As east is far from west, so far has he removed our sins from us. (singing)

This is a reading from the 20th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, beginning at the 20th verse. The mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked a favor of him. Jesus said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine

will sit one at your right hand and one at your left in your kingdom." But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my father."

Here ends the lesson. There is no saint in the Episcopal Church Calendar of Saints today. We have fewer than 365 saintly people in our history evidently. So, I'm looking forward to Friday. Friday, we remember the ancient Saint Polycarp of Smyrna. Polycarp was bishop of what is now the city of Izmir, a coastal city in Western Turkey and he's one of the apostolic fathers, a group of a few early Christian writers who knew some of the apostles personally, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna, who we remember today. Some scholars believe that Polycarp is the actual author of first Timothy, second Timothy and Titus in our Bible, even though the writer claims that he's Paul. This was not uncommon in the ancient world.

Irenaeus, who lived a generation after Polycarp, but knew Polycarp, relates in his writings, remembering Polycarp talking about his own conversion. When he met the apostle, John, and John teaching him and telling him about his visions of the risen Christ. Polycarp was martyred in the early second century. He refused to burn incense to the Roman Emperor, and for that, he was burned at the stake, and then stabbed to death. The traditional account is that because he was so saintly, the fire would not consume his body, and so they stabbed him. Probably, it was just mercy, such as that's mercy.

Polycarp's theology is difficult to track. He's largely unconcerned with the theological questions that developed later. He's not really talking about faith, or works, or what the nature of Jesus's incarnation is, or the nature of the Trinity, all the things that Christians later got worried about. They try to read meaning back into his writings, but that's not really what he was writing about. What is clear from his letters is that these were pastoral, not theological writings. He was exhorting people to take courage during a persecution to which he himself succumbed and he's basically saying to them what he thinks will help them endure this persecution. When he was caught, and questioned, and asked to apostatize, he said, "I've served God for 86 years and God has never done me wrong. Why should I blaspheme him now?"

The fact that he named blasphemy I think is important. Historical research suggests that the Romans who conducted these persecutions were pretty unconcerned with sincerity. They didn't care what you actually believed. They just wanted you to burn the incense, just keep order, do what you are told, even if you wanted to continue being a Christian in your private life. But Polycarp knew to recant would be to burn incense to Caesar, to declare him God, instead of God, the Caesar who was killing his friends. So why reward him for that harm when the God he worshiped had done no harm to him? And I think the circumstances of Polycarp's death belie the illusion that religion and politics are separable. In many corners, we operate under this illusion. But the fact that religion and politics are not separable doesn't start with Polycarp. We see it here in our reading today when the sons of Zebedee asked to be senior members of Jesus's cabinet not recognizing what his kingdom means.

Often, this is interpreted as saying the kingdom is not a political one, it's a spiritual one. But I don't think that's the case. It's not that Jesus's kingdom is one that lies outside of politics, rather it's one that calls for radically different politics altogether. To reject the politics of the present for religious reasons is itself a political stand to claim as Jesus and Polycarp both did, that our God is a God of justice, and by justice, we mean relief to the poor, and to prisoners, and to captives, and to strangers. To claim this is to reject the politics of our world. It means to undermine the political order upon which so much of our present world operates.

Because so much of our world actually operates on the contrary claim that God is about power, and purity, and exclusion, and vengeance. These are overtly political claims also, which is why in this election

year, many, many Christians see their candidate as divinely ordained despite every evidence to the contrary and his utter allergy to Christian religion. Because his rhetoric and his policies speak of power, and purity, and exclusion, and vengeance, it tracks as religious to them all. And while we'd like to think that only happens on one side, we know that the politics of power, and purity, and exclusion, and vengeance operate everywhere in our politics, even if more so on the right than on the left.

The struggle before us then, I think, is not just a political but a spiritual one. And in that sense, during this Lent and onward into this consequential election year, perhaps what we, who proclaim a God of justice, perhaps what we most need is courage, the courage of martyrs like Polycarp, who were unafraid to proclaim the truth of God's justice and unwilling to be intimidated into complacency before the patent and odious blasphemies of our politicians? I invite you please to rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Audience:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Oh God, the maker of heaven and earth. You gave your venerable servant the holy and gentle Polycarp, the boldness to confess Jesus Christ as king and savior, and the steadfastness to die for his faith. Give us grace, following his example, to proclaim before the rulers of this world, the goodness and justice of your kingdom. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever, amen.

Audience:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Now, let us say the words Jesus taught us, praying. Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us the stay 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.

Audience:

Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us the stay 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 our concluding hymn, number 43. (singing)

Please remember to join us if you can downstairs, in the MemCafe after the service, and this evening at 5:15 for communion here in the chapel. Now, this is a blessing of Polycarp's own writing. Now, may the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Eternal high Priest himself and the son of God, Jesus Christ, build you up in faith and truth in all gentleness, and in all freedom from anger, and in forbearance, and

steadfastness, and patience, endurance, and purity. And may the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all and remain with you evermore, amen.

Audience:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Audience:

Thanks be to God.