

**Lent V - March 21, 2010**

**The Reverend Canon Joye Q. Cantrell**

My mother used to love to ask visitors to Charleston, “How are Charlestonians like the Chinese? Charlestonians are like the Chinese because they eat rice and worship their ancestors.”

Yes, indeed, we love rice. When my children were in school in Rochester their friends thought that they were really weird because they had rice at Thanksgiving dinner and not mashed potatoes.

And yes, indeed, we southerners can sometimes be accused of worshipping our ancestors. It used to be that it mattered a lot more who your family was than how much money they had. I am not sure that is still true but it certainly used to be.

We love to look at the past. The good ole days. Sometimes we look back so nostalgically that we forget that the good ole past wasn't always so good. When we lived in Laurens I had a good friend who loved Southern history. He was into Civil War reenacting. Every year at the end of June, he closed his shop for a week to head up to Pennsylvania and re-enact the battle of Gettysburg. I told him one time that if I were going to re-enact I would chose one the South had won like Chancellorsville or Fredricksburg, not one we lost. He looked at me like I had lost my mind.

But we Southerners come by our love of story and history naturally. It is the way we were raised. It is also the way we live our lives as Christians. We remember the story. We retell the story. We sing about the story. The story is our story.

For the past year we have been worshipping here in Averyt Hall because we are preserving our beautiful cathedral. We do this because it is part of our story. It is where we became the congregation that we are. It is where we celebrate the very heart of what it is to be human. Where we worship God, where we share Christ's body and blood, where we bring our children to mark them as Christ's own for ever, where we come to be married, where we come to celebrate the lives of the saints who have gone on before us. We remember, we remember, we remember. But we also restore it for the future. That we may go into it not for solace only but for strength, not for pardon only but for renewal so that we may worthily serve the world in Christ's name. (Eucharistic Prayer C)

In our reading this morning from Isaiah, we hear the words from the mouth of a prophet who spoke to the Israelite community exiled in Babylon. Exile was simply the final humiliating and disorientating blow that spelled the collapse of the world as it was known to this people. Already the temple, city and king, symbols of national and religious identity had been pulled down, burned, destroyed. They were gone. Never to rise again. This was the way things were. The prophet has overheard the despairing words of the people as they said "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God." These words are found in Chapter 40:27 some lines before our reading begins. It is clear that times are bad. The people feel that God has forgotten them. They look back to former times.

But the prophet provokes a new perspective. He goes about it in an interesting way. First he calls the community to remember their history and the past actions of God on their behalf. Verses 16-17 in today's readings are a clear reference to the exodus from the bondage of Egypt.

What did God do for us there, the prophet asks? God cut a path through the sea so we could cross safely on dry land. Then God released the waters of the sea, and the waves drown the pursuing armies of Pharaoh. (From Exodus 14:30-32)

Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people held the Lord in awe and believed. Based on a remembrance of that time, the prophet now calls for some intuition. Isaiah says to them, yes, you are experiencing hard times in exile. But God does not want you simply to know what is. God also wants you to know what can be. To provoke a change in perspective the prophet commands forgetfulness-even for what is most cherished-so that newness can be perceived.

"Do not remember the former things,  
Or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
Even now it springs forth do you not perceive it?"

You see my brothers and sister, the nostalgic relation to tradition has threatened to tie the people to their past and to stultify alertness to present realities, responsiveness to new opportunities, and the potential for growth into yet unrealized possibilities. Israel needed to be shocked out of lethargy. And Isaiah reminds them that God is not limited to the past but is active in contemporary events. And we too need to hear these words as much as that community needed them.

"God is about to do a new thing;  
Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

Isaiah is reminding us to let go of what in the past shackles us. In twelve step language we are reminded to get rid of stinking thinking. How tenaciously we cling to patterns, to relationships, to ways of thinking about the world that served another time and another situation. God can and will create a new thing in our midst and it will be even better than we can ask or imagine.

I ask you-what new things could God create in you and through you if you let go of old ways of thinking? If we can forgive the hurts, injustices, the rejections, the pessimism of the world—God can create in us great things.

Let go. Let go of the feelings that your parents let you down. Let go of the idea that if you became an engineer or a lawyer or a teacher that you would always have a job. Let go of the idea that if you live your life right than you will get a pass on cancer or heart problems or what ever. Let go of the idea that this country, this community, this parish and each of us have lived our best years. What ever it is; let it go. God wants to create in each of us, in this church, in this city in this world a new thing.

This morning I invite each of you to join Isaiah and Paul in having as part of your way of life—the trust that God is always at work in the world and in our lives. Expect great thing. Expect Great Things. With God there is always more.

Chose not to think that the way you know God today is all you will know of God. Expect that your prayer life, that your knowledge of God, that your walk with the Lord can and will get better and better. God is doing a new thing-if you can perceive it.

Have expectations of us as a community of faith. Our Dean always reminds us that with God there is no scarcity. Act out of a theory of abundance, expect more. If we think like and act like the best days of our lives are over, that the best days of this

parish are over, that the best days of this country are over than you they will be and you will not be able to perceive the new things that God wills to be brought about.

"Remember not the former things,

Nor consider the things of old.

Behold, I am doing a new thing

Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and ostriches for I give water in the

wilderness, Rivers in the desert to give drink to my chosen people,

the people whom I formed for myself, that they might declare my praise."

Believe that God is doing new things, in our lives, in this cathedral in our country and in the world. Believe the promises. Trust in God.