



# Faith in the City



## **The Collect**

Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## **The First Reading**     *Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7*

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.



Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

## **The Epistle**     *2 Timothy 2:8-15*

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David-- that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he will also deny us;  
if we are faithless, he remains faithful--  
for he cannot deny himself.

Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

## **Gospel**     *Luke 17:11-19*

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."



I have a lot to be grateful for in St. Mary's, Uphams Corner. It was there that my wife Monica and I first started going to church together. It was there that I ate cat fish and collard greens for the first time. It was there that this gritty urban church offered a much needed dose of real life for me to counterbalance the closeted world of Harvard. We trudged a mile through the snow from the T-stop through the Boston snow to make it church one very blustery Sunday, and we drove kids to their first experience of camp and the ocean, and saw the wonder come across their faces all in a rush. And it was there that I saw what it can look like to live the words of Jeremiah, and seek the welfare, the peace, or in Hebrew, the shalom of the city.

What does God's shalom look like, do you imagine, when the city looks like Uphams Corner? That particular part of Boston those 16 years ago would look similar today to any number of urban American neighborhoods. It had seen so-called 'white flight' years earlier. The once proud and somewhat stately homes of what had been a predominantly white Catholic neighborhood, looked tired and in cases derelict. Graffiti tags belonging to the various gangs that



patrolled the streets could be seen everywhere. Drug related and other violent crime was rife among the youth, so much as that we were discouraged from being out too long after dark. Yet this was only part of the story. Uphams Corner had great food, a string of deeply embedded and highly committed social service agencies and non-profits. It was beautiful, in so many ways, and when it lost one of its own, it knew how to honor the dead, and to comfort the living. Its streets and stores revealed what comes after the euphemistic phenomenon of 'white-flight', which there saw a vibrant coming together of longer established Caribbean and African American communities with more recently arrived Cape Verdeans.

St. Mary's reflected this mix well, so much so that sermons had to be preached one line at a time, while they were translated into Creole for those whose English was not steady enough to keep track. The food after church was often the only sure square meal that kids in the bustling youth community at St. Mary's could count on that week. The flags of parishioners' various countries of origin hung from the rafters in the nave, and the song we have just sung



together 'Thank you, Lord' around our gospel this morning, was sung every Sunday with a richness and a strength of feeling from people who experienced an almost painfully deep sense of gratitude toward God.

For the bi-lingual sermons, the food, the flags, and the singing were just the signs of the real faithfulness present there to the God who, in the lived words of Second Timothy, had not given up on being faithful to them. St. Mary's didn't merely abide in the city, reflecting its diversity and struggles, it moved out toward the city. Seeking in the city, as Jeremiah encouraged the exiles in Babylon, the Shalom, the deep peace and justice of the divine life for all living things, trusting that in the Shalom of the city, they would indeed find our own.

At the heart of this movement out was Fr. Ellis, first African American leader of that church and someone who remains the most delightfully unorthodox clergy-person I have ever had the pleasure to serve with. Ellis was an old-school worker priest, who donned his black cassock to roam around the neighborhood, chastising market store owners for



profanities on the T-shirts they sold, and striding right up to gang members inviting them to church and a better chance at life than the streets. He was bold and he was everywhere. The church had so little money that they never balanced a budget, but they still ran a food bank and after school program for scores of kids, and if anyone in Uphams Corner needed help with a kid on the street, Fr. Ellis was who they turned to. For everybody knew that when those kids went to court, it was Ellis who went with them. When they got off tracks, it was he would bring them into his office, careful to leave the door open so that everyone else could hear him give that young man or woman a dressing down. He told me once that his model ministry for ministry was simply to channel his mother, the memory of whose voice bellowing at him down the road, he said, was still enough to send shivers down his spine to this day.

When I left St. Mary's, 'Fr. Ellis', as he was ubiquitously known, literally asked me for the clergy shirt on my back. I had had it made for me a year before during a three-month placement in South Africa. 'Brother, God knows that I'm gonna look good in that shirt', and he did, it seemed to be a



fit for him much more than it ever did for me, and I like to think that somewhere out in the mid-west where he now serves, he still wears that shirt as a reminder of those years of faith in God's city.

A long parable, of another place and time, but the message is simple, isn't it. God is capable of so much more than the limits of our imagined capacities. It's true of the church and it's of our lives. Yet that faithfulness of God, that will always be sure and present, is an opening we only truly get to see when we step out, beyond our certainties and comfort, and toward the lives of others God is already loving, and forgiving, and transforming, just as God is doing to our own.

Seek the shalom of the city, for in its peace you will find your own. Words of an ancient and modern need. The exiles of Jeremiah's day needed freeing from the bondage that believed that they could only be defined by what they had lost. Yet, it was not enough for them to know that they were free to be God's people in new times and places, they needed to step out beyond that internal conviction and express it within the very place that had been the cause of



their alienation: Babylon. Build your homes, grow your food, nurture your families, fall in love, and seek the peace and justice of God in the place of your discomfort, at the points where you feel the most tension, across the border of what you believe you know. For it is there, in the heart of our displacement, that real growth, and deeper maturity, and a life of true faithfulness is to be found.

The life of faith is the life that seeks to step into the spaces for living and transformation that God opens up for us that are by their nature hard because they will stretch us and challenge us, and draw us out of our false sense of security that we somehow know how the world is. The faithfulness of God doesn't act to make it easier for us to step forward in the face of such tension, via cheap comforts or shallow platitudes, instead it asks us to trust God to go even deeper into that space of unknowing.





In this sense, your life will be as rich as it is risked; your heart will be as loving as it is open to the loves of others. Some of us will march in the Pride Parade today not to tell the world how right we are, or how wrong those protestors are who will no doubt be ensconced at the turn onto 10th street. Rather, we march to express the openness of our hearts to all and every expression of human being, in all of the diversity God created, a diversity that we are not even beginning to understand, not merely beyond binarisms, but beyond all of the ways that we might seek to reduce the mystery of God's creative power to the limited confines of category or type. God's mystery is everywhere, sitting right next to you now in fact. Yet we are not called to school the world on how enlightened we are, but to love it and be opened up by it, seeking as is our vocation, the life of God that resides in every human being; those who love us and those who struggle to.



**Faith in the City**  
October 13th, 2019  
*All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta*  
Rev. Dr. Simon Mainwaring

To be a people who truly do have faith in the city is to be those who will step out into it knowing that such journeys will change us from the inside out. I invite you to seek the shalom of the city. Seek God's deep and everlasting peace and justice for the people around you, you included, for in that opening up to the creativity and wonder of the divine life around us, you and I will indeed find our own shalom, our own peace, our own place at the divine banquet where all are welcome.

I give thanks that this church is still stepping out into this our city. My commitment to you is that we will only do that more. So, be of good courage, dear saints of God. Hold fast to that which is good. Render to no one, evil for evil. Honor everyone. Love, as you are loved, forever.