

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

This Wednesday it will be forty-five years and one month to the day that a suspected terrorist was arrested and imprisoned. Helped by the CIA, police had captured the South African Nelson Mandela. Mandela would remain in prison for twenty seven years before he was eventually freed. Eighteen of those years were spent in a tiny prison cell on Robben Island in South Africa. With no running water and less than rudimentary sanitation, Mandela was allowed no more than one letter and visitor every six months. And yet the man who emerged from prison did not seek revenge or retribution. On the day of Mandela's release he declared a commitment to peace and reconciliation.

It is easy to forget what Mandela went through. Easy to forget just how dominant the evil apartheid regime was. Easy to forget that it was never inevitable that Mandela would be freed. Easy to forget that another person in a similar situation might not have gone out of his way to seek reconciliation and peace with his former oppressors.

The story of South African apartheid is worth remembering though. Not simply because it is a story of evil bearing the seeds of its own destruction. But because it is a story of how the powerless are empowered and the oppressed are freed. In our reading from Ecclesiasticus we hear 'The Lord overthrows the thrones of rulers, and enthrones the lowly in their place.' Its hard to think of a more dramatic illustration of this text than Mandela's life journey from imprisonment as the

lowest of the low in Robben Island to his election as President of his country.

Last week just outside the Houses of Parliament, in the heart of London, a statue was unveiled commemorating Nelson Mandela. Mandela's statue stands not so far from that of Abraham Lincoln, another icon of resistance to the evils of racial supremacy.

The sad truth of the matter, however, is that while Mandela and his fellow country men and women changed their country, their work is not over. Their work is not over in South Africa, just as their work is not over in this country and throughout the world.

In both our Gospel and epistle, we hear radical claims being made in which those who are least, whether strangers or poor, cripples or blind, are to be treated like royalty, as if they were the most important people. These are indeed radical claims that go against all our social programming. But the Christian ethic of hospitality asks us to treat those who have least as if they have the most. In other words, both Paul and Jesus, believe in affirmative action.

Nowhere in the bible will you hear that all people should be treated in the same way regardless of circumstance. Rather, the biblical concern is always to emphasize the needs of those who have been shortchanged and those who have excluded from sharing in society's goods.

The banquet that Jesus talks about can only be understood if we think about it as a story about affirmative action. And while it is a story about the

elevating of the lowly, to many of us it is difficult to hear as it implies that where the lowly rise the privileged fall. The institutional church has of course been tempted to spiritualize this kind of text and claim that it is not really about this world. It has a higher more exalted meaning. But that would be to miss the point. Jesus is not talking about some abstract spiritual banquet. Jesus is talking about the way we treat one another. And what Jesus is saying is that we need to take affirmative action to promote the well being of those whose well being is so often neglected and compromised.

When it comes to the question of race in contemporary life we all need to hear the words of this morning's gospel. We need to hear Jesus's call to affirmative action. It is a call that is echoed in Paul's injunction that we give strangers hospitality. And it is a call that we need to take seriously.

In many parts of this country the test results of grade school children are being used to predict how many prisons will be needed in five to ten years time. Crime rates continue to be highest where the educational opportunities are the least. And across pretty much the whole of this country poverty and lack of educational opportunity are disproportionately spread over different racial groups. The truth is that while we are equal in God's sight we have not all been given an equal hand or start in life. Access to good education and a safe environment is not uniform in this country. And like it or not in major cities and rural communities alike the color of one's skin has a significant effect on quality of environment and education that you receive.

Living in the Upper Valley it is hard to believe that this kind of radical inequality exists. After all, we pride ourselves on our love of diversity. And yet our own community is structurally complicit in the inequalities. We who have much are able to afford a wonderful bi-state school district. But even those who have less just a few miles down the road in less expensive areas are not able to fund schools as fully.

It seems to me that the divine banquet of which Jesus speaks could easily be interpreted as a challenge to conventional thinking about everything from economics and racism to class and education. The challenge for us is whether we are able to leave the private realm in which we read scripture for personal edification and sustenance. Many theologians and many Christians are not ready to leave the safety of their private faith. They don't want to connect the dots from the private to the public. They hear the words of Christ on a Sunday and they keep them safely locked up during the week.

But there is another way. A way that Nelson Mandela in his autobiography called a 'Long Walk to Freedom'. That Long Walk to Freedom is not something that is achieved overnight. But if we are able to hear Christ's words in both their private and public registers we can properly begin our journey. Faith is of no account if we are not able to change our public actions in the light of our cherished beliefs. But if we can be hospitable to God and the stranger in our daily lives, we will find ourselves truly free. Like Mandela we need to fight that freedom. Not for the freedom to be what we want. But for the freedom to allow others to be what we already enjoy but they may only dream of. Amen.