
Ecce Quam Bonum! But The Problem Is That We ARE Brothers!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Second Sunday of Easter – Year B

Psalm 133
John 20:19-31

Today is one of the great Sundays of the church year, the second Sunday of Easter. Yes! The official Easter season lasts more than one day – it lasts a Great Fifty Days!—and today is the Second Sunday of Easter. Alleluia! Christ is risen again and again!

Furthermore, the gospel reading for this day, by ancient tradition, is always the same story. It is the beautiful story of Saint Thomas, who missed the first appearance of Jesus in the upper room, and who says to his fellow disciples, “Unless I see Jesus (like you did), I will not believe.” His claim makes sense. He had missed the meeting, missed the first appearance of Jesus, and he was simply saying he wanted the same experience as his brothers (and, presumably, the same experience as his sisters).

And, so, Jesus does show up, a week later, and Thomas is there. “Peace be with you,” says Jesus, “put your finger here, see my hands, put your hand in my side.” And Thomas is the disciple who declares, “My Lord and my God!” It is a beautiful story, but it is not a story about doubt. I do not believe in the title, “Doubting Thomas.” Thomas was an apostle of courage, not doubt, the courage to touch the wounds of Christ, the courage to declare Christ as Lord and God.

Today’s gospel is a beautiful story, but I am not preaching about that today. I am preaching about the appointed psalm for today. It is Psalm 133, one of the great psalms.

Psalm 133 – Ecce Quam Bonum

*1 Oh, how good and pleasant it is, **
when brethren live together in unity!

*2 It is like fine oil upon the head **
that runs down upon the beard,

*3 Upon the beard of Aaron, **
and runs down upon the collar of his robe.

*4 It is like the dew of Hermon **
that falls upon the hills of Zion.

*5 For there the Lord has ordained the blessing: **
life for evermore. (Psalm 133)

One can substitute the word, kindred, for “brethren.” Or, even “sisters.” But it is that first phrase that gets remembered in Christian history: “O how good it is!” In Latin, this phrase is *Ecce, quam bonum*. *Ecce quam bonum* has become the motto of many a school, and community, and church. It is the motto of the University of the South, and it is thus inscribed in one of our stained glass windows, out in the hallway facing the cloister

garden. "Behold how good it is when kindred live together in unity."

For the purpose of this sermon, however, I am going to use the old translation of this verse, using the word, "brothers." I do not mean to be sexist here, but you will see my reason in a moment.

Most of us have often used words similar to Psalm 133, when we have longed for unity. When the divisions of the world seem so fractious and alarming. "Why can't we be united?" we ask. And then we start quoting great lines like this one: "Behold, how good it is when brothers live together in unity." Or, "one nation, under God, indivisible." "We are brothers," we claim, "united. Let's stop fighting."

*"Come on people now, smile on your brother.
Everybody get together, try to love one another right now."* (The Youngbloods!)

I love to sing that song and make those quotations. But I think there is a problem in those statements.

The problem is this: The problem is that we *are* brothers.

Yes, the problem is that we *are* brothers already. Have you ever looked at the history of brothers in the Bible?

The first brothers in the Bible were Cain and Abel. Remember them? Theirs was the first case of jealousy. It was jealousy, envy, between brothers. And it resulted in murder. Cain killed his brother Abel.

How about the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, brothers competing for the attention of their mother, and the blessing of their father! Jacob tricks his brother and his father, and steals his father's blessing. How about the older brothers of Joseph? Who are also jealous of their father's lavish care of their brother, and who throw their brother into a pit, or sell him into slavery, or something like that.

How about one of the saddest brothers in the Bible, the elder brother of the prodigal son, who refuses to join the celebration of his younger brother's return?

It is not always easy and fun to have a brother. It is hard to have a brother. Oh, I know, of course, brotherhood can become one of the deepest and most generous relationships in humanity. And sisterhood, too. Of course! (And let me say to my own brother: I am not talking about *you*!) But brothers are where we learn both competition in a healthy way, and jealousy in an unhealthy way. And that jealousy, in history, can lead to violence.

This is what leads me to appreciate the inner power of Psalm 133. I do not believe it is a "pie-in-the-sky," simplistic, pietistic affection for unity. I believe Psalm 133, in its fullness, acknowledges the complications of brotherhood. Do you remember what the rest of Psalm 133 is saying, after the opening lines? Here it is, again:

*Oh, how good and pleasant it is, *
when brethren live together in unity!*

*It is like fine oil upon the head *
that runs down upon the beard,*

*Upon the beard of Aaron, *
and runs down upon the collar of his robe.*

*It is like the dew of Hermon *
that falls upon the hills of Zion.*

*For there the Lord has ordained the blessing: *
life for evermore.*

Notice the proper names in Psalm 133. Who gets named in Psalm 133? It is Aaron, Hermon, and Zion.

Let us start with Aaron. What a lovely and luscious sight for fine oil to be running down the beard of Aaron. And messy! (Like the water of baptism we saw last Sunday, running down the heads of our six adult baptismal candidates!) Aaron is anointed, according to scripture.

But, who anoints him? Well, it has to be his brother, Moses, who anoints Aaron. And scripture is clear that Moses and Aaron, two so-called brothers, did not always get along. Oh, I know the Bible tries to clean up their relationship. But they also had a divisive fractious relationship. Remember who was fashioning the golden calf

when Moses came down from the mountain? It was his brother, Aaron. In fact, many scholars now believe they are the sources for the two different types of priesthood in the Hebrew tradition: the Levite priesthood (of Moses) and the Aaronic priesthood (of Aaron). The divided relationship, said to be between brothers, is the source of two different priesthood traditions.

I believe that what Psalm 133 is saying then, is that two competing brothers, Moses and Aaron, are being reconciled in the anointing with holy oil.

And, further in Psalm 133, what about this “dew of Hermon that falls upon the hills of Zion?” Maybe we know what Zion means. That, of course, is Mount Zion, the holy mountain of Jerusalem, the site of the Temple, the place of Hebrew holiness.

The great Mount Zion! But have you seen Mount Hermon? Zion is a tiny foothill compared to Mount Hermon, which looms in the distance, up in the north, often covered with snow. Did you know that the full name of that mountain is Baal-Hermon? Yes, “Baal,” as in the name of the early Canaanite god, the competing god with Yahweh. Mount Baal-Hermon is a foreign place, with other gods. Yet, Psalm 133 acknowledges that the dew from far-away Mount Hermon, divine dew from that place, too, falls upon the hill of Zion. The wet dew, of course, is like wet oil.

And then, notice how Psalm 133 concludes. There! There, in that place where oil flows between brothers, that place where dew falls from the gods, there, says Psalm, “the Lord has ordained the blessing.”

The very short psalm, Psalm 133, finishes with blessing. It is a short blessing, but it acknowledges, it assumes, the complicated history of fractious relationships: between brothers like Moses and Aaron, between foreign lands like Hermon and Zion.

And, then, the psalm sees something else. It sees that something good can come out of envy relationships and jealous relationships. The relationships between jealous brothers, and jealous sisters, and jealous communities, and jealous countries, and jealous peoples. And jealous disciples, too, like Thomas, who wanted to see the same thing his colleagues had seen.

Yes, the problem is that we are brothers, and the problem is that we are sisters. But, O how good and pleasant it is when brethren live together in unity! And sisters, too. When that unity occurs, wet anointing occurs, blessing occurs.

*Oh, how good and pleasant it is, **
when brethren live together in unity!

*It is like fine oil upon the head **
that runs down upon the beard,

*Upon the beard of Aaron, **
and runs down upon the collar of his robe.

*It is like the dew of Hermon **
that falls upon the hills of Zion.

*For there the Lord has ordained the blessing: **
life for evermore.

AMEN.

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