

Pentecost 10, Proper 15, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Mount Hermon  
rises majestically  
in the far north  
of the holy land.  
Snow capped in winter and spring,  
it is lush and a sanctuary for birds and plants,  
including a rare form of wild wheat.  
And at its foot  
rise the springs of Banias -  
or Caesarea Philippi  
as it was known in the time of Jesus -  
it was near there  
that Peter confessed  
Jesus as the Christ.  
The springs of Banias  
are the second largest of the springs  
that feed the Jordan River.  
And added to them is the snowmelt  
that runs down from Mount Hermon  
each spring.

And nothing could be farther from Mount Hermon  
than the other end of the river that carries its waters.  
The place where the Jordan  
meets the Dead Sea  
is a wasteland.  
Acres of salty sand and gravel, just the occasional tuft of rough grass;  
a little further away from the salt, low scrubby trees,  
and heading up into the hills  
bare desert.

It's no wonder  
that the people who travelled the road  
from the Jordan River valley  
toiling up through the hills  
to Jerusalem,  
the temple,

the place where God was known to dwell,  
 it's no wonder  
 that as they sang their traditional songs of pilgrimage,  
 they sang of the blessings of water,  
 the water that had sustained them,  
 as they travelled toward  
 the most holy place.

Our psalm today  
 is one of those songs,  
 one of the songs of ascents  
 that were traditionally sung by the people of God  
 as they travelled up to Jerusalem  
 to attend the three great pilgrim festivals,  
 Pesach, that is, Passover, Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, and Sukkot, the Feast of Booths or  
 Tabernacles.  
 All these psalms are hopeful,  
 all these psalms speak  
 of the goodness and blessings  
 of God.

And the hope, the blessing, the goodness of God  
 that is celebrated in our psalm today  
 is the gift of unity.

“Oh, how good and pleasant it is,” sing the pilgrims,  
 “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.”

As they walk up to Jerusalem, feet sore, mouths dry,  
 the people singing this psalm  
 are presumably remembering the experience  
 of previous visits to Jerusalem.

There's nothing like a great gathering  
 to bring people together.

I remember my first U2 concert,  
high up in the stands at Madison Square Garden  
watching the band on the stage  
and seeing people around me dancing and singing along.  
And then the ultimate experience -  
the band slowly leaving the stage  
and the audience - or was it a congregation - continuing to sing.

Or you may remember those great Billy Graham crusades of the 1950s,  
Madison Square Garden packed to hear him in 1957,  
and the tours that changed the lives of my parents and many of their friends in Australia in 1959.

Or you may have had the privilege of participating in the Eucharist at our Diocesan Convention  
each year.

People from across our diocese,  
from Brooklyn and Queens and Nassau and Suffolk,  
black, white, brown, and every color in between,  
Episcopalians who worship in 16 different languages,  
all together worshipping God.

And here at St James this week,  
at the funeral for Joe Pistell, a member at All Souls in Stony Brook,  
their congregation  
and staff from the Stony Brook School where his wife works  
and members from here who know the family  
and people from our wider community,  
filling our church.  
You should have heard the singing!

And a few weeks ago  
as I looked down on the congregation  
and there were two parishioners,  
one who has been unwell  
and another who is going through some family trauma,  
people who barely know each other,  
standing hand in hand  
drawing strength  
and comfort  
from one another.

And all of us, every Sunday  
as we worship,  
always held together, united by worshipping God

and our faith in Christ,  
 united in the waters of baptism  
 and the bread and wine, body and blood,  
 of the Eucharist.

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

It’s such a gift, isn’t it?

No wonder the pilgrims talked about it  
 in such extravagant terms.  
 Like the oil used for anointing,  
 precious and holy,  
 anointing a priest or king,  
 that is not simply a symbolic dab  
 but is poured over their head  
 and runs over them.  
 It reminds me of the women  
 who emptied perfume  
 over Jesus feet  
 at the beginning of the week  
 that we call Holy,  
 the beginning of the week  
 when he was  
 to die.

Like the dew of Mount Hermon,  
 running down  
 to feed the Jordan River,  
 flowing a hundred miles south  
 to water and bless  
 the parched land in the south.

And it reminds me of the water of baptism  
 not simply a symbolic drop  
 but scooped up and pouring over a baby’s head,  
 yes, even making a mess of the beautiful Christening gown,  
 the abundant blessing of God.

It’s the reason that I fill the chalices so full.  
 Not because I have a great desire to drink large quantities of leftover port at 10 in the morning,  
 but because I don’t want anyone to feel

that there is not enough wine.  
God's grace can never be rationed.  
It's abundant, more than we could ever need,  
flowing over.

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

A few weeks ago  
when the vestry went on retreat,  
we did an exercise  
that helped us see our own unity.  
And I'm going to try it with you all, now. And this will require you to move around a little.

Find someone you know a little bit, but not well. Now spend the next couple of minutes  
finding something you have in common.

Now you two, go find two other people you don't know well.  
Do the same thing.

We could go on like this,  
until we were all one big group.  
And I suspect that we'd find one thing in common -  
that we come here  
to worship God.

I hope you'll continue this after the service. Talk to people you don't know well. Find out more  
about the unity God has blessed us with.

We are one in Christ.  
It's a gift,  
a gift we can give each other  
and a gift we can give our world,  
a gift that is sorely needed right now,  
as we hear about conflict in Israel and Gaza and Iraq,  
and closer to home  
the death and protests in Missouri.

Because it is indeed good  
when we live together in unity!

And I'd like to finish with a song.  
You may know it, and if you do, please join in.

If you don't, just join in the chorus.

It goes

“And they'll know we are Christians by our love,

By our Love,

Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.”

We are One in The Spirit,

We are One in The Lord.

We are One in The Spirit,

We are One in The Lord.

And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.

Chorus

And they'll know we are Christians by our love,

By our Love,

Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will work with each other,

We will work side by side.

We will work with each other,

We will work side by side.

And we'll guard each one's dignity

And save each one's pride.

We will walk with each other,

We will walk hand in hand.

We will walk with each other,

We will walk hand in hand.

And together we'll spread the News

that God is in our land.

All praise to our Father,

from whom all things come,

And all praise to Christ Jesus,

his only Son,

And all praise to the Spirit,

who makes us one.

Peter Scholtes (alt.)