

2025 Convention Homily

Psalm 25, Romans 12, John 6 (the Feast of Vida Dutton Scudder)

There couldn't be a more appropriate lectionary for our time and this Convention than the readings for Vida Dutton Scudder, a saint on the calendar of Lesser Feast and Fasts.

For those of us who don't know her, Vida Dutton Scudder was a scholar and academician in a time when few women were able to be such. She was born in 1861 to a Congregationalist missionary in India. He died the next year, and she and her mother returned to Boston to family. She attended secondary schools in Europe and Boston and graduated from Smith College in 1884. She was one of the first two American women admitted to the graduate program at Oxford University, where she was influenced by John Ruskin, Leo Tolstoy, and George Bernard Shaw. She began teaching at Wellesley College in 1887 and taught there for forty years. She died in 1954.

Vida Dutton Scudder was a scholar. Her lifelong devotion was to writing and research. She wrote widely and extensively on poetry, literature, history, socialism, and Christian spirituality, publishing more than thirty works. She was also devoted to exploring the relationship between Christian belief and action in the world. She spent much of her life trying to figure out how Christians should live in society and how they should respond to the Gospel's demand for justice and compassion. She founded, with others, the College Settlements Association, providing housing for college women, controlled by college women. She joined the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross, and the Christians Socialists, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. She had a lifelong engagement with the labor movement, founding the Federal Labor Union, and getting involved in a textile union strike in Lawrence, MA. She said, in relation to that strike:

I would rather never again wear a thread of woolen than know my garments had been woven at the cost of such misery as I have seen and known past the shadow of a doubt to have existed in this town. ... If the wages are of necessity below the standard to maintain man and woman in decency and in health, then the woolen industry has not a present right to exist in Massachusetts.

She founded the Episcopal Church Socialist League, and for a time, tried to reconcile Marxism and Christianity. She was one of the foremost experts in her day on the Franciscans. There's much more to say, but you get the picture.

Vida was interested in practical Christianity. She wanted to know how the spiritual life connected with action in the world. What does it mean to be a faithful person? She wanted to understand how the teachings of the church could be lived out in contemporary society; how, for example, to care for the poor or to lift up the lowly.

I think we find ourselves in very similar circumstances, needing to find concrete and practical actions that help our communities to move closer to the reign of God.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus is the center of our lives, that he is our bread, that he feeds us and brings us to eternal life with him. We are asked to set our lives and our concerns in the context of God's unflinching care for us. We cannot be pulled from his care. And we have God's promise that justice will prevail, that sins will be forgiven, that love and life will overcome death. And so, we plunge into the chaos of life in this world armed with that assurance, seeking justice, reconciliation and peace. The strength that we have comes from God, or

as former Presiding Bishop Curry says, from clinging to Jesus and his teaching. It is that teaching, above all, that is the bread that sustains us.

Our job, as it were, our constant challenge, is to seek God's way and to follow God's path. We never outgrow our need to be reminded, to be regrounded, in the teaching of Jesus which we so easily forget in the press of daily life. We are not meant to be conformed to this world, but renewed by the teaching of Jesus, and pledged, as Paul tells us, to a counter-intuitive discipline of blessing, rejoicing, weeping, living in harmony, associating with the lowly, returning evil with love. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord. It is not our job to punish. It is not our calling to seek vengeance. Hatred has no place in our vocabulary. We are called to compassion, to associate with the lowly. We are called to seek justice. We are called to reconciliation. The thrashing we'd like to give our enemies belongs to God alone.

All of this is easy to say, and a bit harder to do. The world we find ourselves in bears little resemblance to the kingdom of God. I think many of us had hoped that the world was moving in that direction. It is a bitter disappointment to find ourselves amidst so much division, still living out America's original sin of racism, still struggling with issues of dignity and equity. It is perhaps helpful to remember that God set the goals of inclusion, justice and forgiveness, in a similar time of division and oppression, long before the Constitution was written, and has patiently borne with the sin of every era since. The manifestation of God's kingdom among us requires study and prayer and community and courage and hope. It takes facing our world and its love of money and power with love for God's children and a willingness to connect. It takes determination to keep going when it seems no one cares and the task is impossible. It takes faith in God and in one another and trust that our work, however small it seems, will be used by God for good.

I've often wondered what it was like for the saints we venerate. What was it like for Vida in the midst of the labor strike or when Marxism turned out to be a cruel false doctrine. What did Frederick Douglas think during reconstruction or Susan B. Anthony when women's rights still depended on men? Surely there must have been a sense of loss, a sense that their dreams had failed. Or perhaps, they continued to feed on the bread of life and so found strength and hope to continue. This diocese has powerful ministries and a determination to renew itself. The goal before us is not to get our way or to defeat our enemies, but to follow Jesus and trust in God. My prayer for us today is that we will do just that, offering what we can to God and living as signs of hope and faith amidst the world around us. Let us feed on Jesus and live. May it be so. Amen.