



The Readings for Ember Wednesday, 2009

Acts 13:44-49

44 The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul. ⁴⁶Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, 'It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." ' 48 When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. ⁴⁹Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region.

Luke 4:16-21

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

The Homily

J.J.

In the Church's Calendar, today is listed as an Ember Day, specifically Ember Wednesday. But, you ask, what in all the world is an ember day? Well, Ember Days are of ancient origin. The term "ember" is a shortening of the Latin words "quatuor tempora," which means "four seasons" or "four times." Ember Days are three days—Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, appointed near the beginning of each season of the year: in September (Autumn), December (Winter), the beginning of Lent (Spring), and the week after Pentecost (Summer). They are days devoted to fasting and to prayer.

Formerly, they were ancient Roman festivals to beseech the blessings of the gods: one in summer for harvest, one in autumn for the vintage, and one in winter for the planting of seed. By the second century, Christians in Rome "baptized" these pagan observances, and added them to their annual observance of Easter and Pentecost. Around the third century, the early Church added the fourth Ember Day for Spring (The ancient Romans only had the three Ember festivals). These four Christian Ember Day Observances sort of anchored the Church's "Year of Grace" when the liturgical calendar was yet in its infancy—when there was no Advent Season yet, no Christmas, no Epiphany, when there was only an uncertain and emerging Lenten Season—none of these observances—just Easter, Pentecost, and the Ember Days

Originally these ancient Roman observances or festivals were tied to the earth, to the birth and growth of crops. In the fifth century, the Church gave these celebrations a new meaning: Ember Days, especially the Ember Saturdays, become the quarterly dates for the ordination of deacons and priests, and, therefore . . . these quarterly Ember Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays are no longer “party days”, but days of fasting and supplication—not just for the earth, but for the Church, for its ministers and ministry. They became a time to pray for the Church.

Today, on this Lenten Ember Wednesday (and I would encourage also on Ember Friday and Ember Saturday of this week), we may want to observe this Early Church custom of fasting and prayer. I intend to, and I encourage you to do the same, as you are able. Therefore, in keeping with the Ember Day tradition, let us pray, together: (I.) For those to be ordained, (II.) For the choice of fit persons for the ministry, and (III.) For all Christians in their vocation (and that includes you, the ministry of Lay People. Please turn to the Book of Common Prayer, p. 246, Collects #15, For the Ministry (Ember Days).

I. For those to be ordained

Almighty God, the giver of all good gifts, in your divine providence you have appointed various orders in your Church: Give your grace, we humbly pray, to all who are [now] called to any office and ministry for your people; and so fill them with the truth of your doctrine and clothe them with holiness of life, that they may faithfully serve before you, to the glory of your great Name and for the benefit of your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

II. For the choice of fit persons for the ministry

O God, you led your holy apostles to ordain ministers in every place: Grant that your Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, may choose suitable persons for the ministry of Word and Sacrament, and may uphold them in their work for the extension of your kingdom; through him who is the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

III. For all Christians in their vocation

Almighty and everlasting God, by whose Spirit the whole body of your faithful people is governed and sanctified: Receive our supplications and prayers, which we offer before you for all members of you holy Church, that in their vocation and ministry they may truly and devoutly serve you; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

S.D.G.

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