

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I. Refreshment Sunday

A. Today is the Fourth Sunday in Lent—also known as Mid-Lent.

1. Another name for today is Refreshment Sunday.

2. Being the middle of Lent, historically, **Refreshment Sunday** was a day when you could relax your strict Lenten Fast and Penance and have a brief break.

3. Another name for today is *Laetare Sunday* or *Rose Sunday*—for much the same reason.

B. The name, *Laetare Sunday*, comes from the Introit—a sung psalm or canticle—at the beginning of the Latin Mass.

1. "*Laetare Jerusalem*" ("Rejoice, O Jerusalem") is Latin from Isaiah 66:10, sung as the entrance hymn;

- and thus, the day was named.

2. You could imagine in the days of stricter penitence and fasting how excited people would be for "*Laetare Sunday*" and its call to rejoice and to relax the fast.

3. It was a day of hope—that the joys of Easter were within sight.

4. Traditionally on this day, **ROSE**-colored vestments were worn—as a lighter shade of the traditional Lenten violet—symbolizing the relaxation of the restrictions.

5. Also, in some places, flowers were allowed on the altar, the organ could be played (as it had been silenced for Lent), and weddings could take place.

6. And **Servants** were released from service for the day to visit their mothers—hence, in England, it is called “Mothering Sunday.”

7. In the Middle Ages, in addition to the *Laetare* introit—the Epistle was St. Paul’s comments on the story of Hagar and Sarah—talking of motherhood—and the Gospel was the Miracle of the Feeding of the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish.

8. So, the tradition grew for servants to visit their mothers **and** to eat special simnel cakes—symbolizing the reduction of Lenten Fasting and reflecting the story of the Feeding of the 5,000.

II. “God So Loved the World

A. But whatever you want to call today, it is an opportunity to change gears—to do things a little differently—and so that’s what I thought we would do today, as we take a little time to meditate on piece of music whose text is the Gospel for today: “God So Loved the World” by John Stainer.

- But first a little background.

1. **John Stainer** was an English Organist, Composer, and Choir Master in the mid to late 1800’s.

2. He was the youngest student to receive his Bachelor of Music from Oxford—and became the Organist and Choir Director at Magdalen College and later at St. Paul’s Cathedral from 1872-1888.

3. He was an amazing organist and a marvelous choir director—raising the standards of music wherever he worked—even cajoling hard-to-work-with choristers with life tenure to come to rehearsal and improve.

4. He was Knighted by Queen Victoria in 1888.

5. Unfortunately, his output of music and organ performances took its toll on his eyesight and he retired from St. Paul’s in 1888.

6. In retirement, he still would play concerts and write pieces, until his death at the age of 60 in 1901.

B. Although his music was extensive and very well-known during his lifetime, it is not well-known today.

1. The one work of John Stainer that has stood the test of time is his oratorio, “The Crucifixion.”

2. This oratorio was written in 1887, for choir and soloist—as it was designed so that it could be sung by parish church choirs.

3. And the most beloved and performed work of the oratorio is the anthem “God So Loved the World.”

C. Based on our Gospel today, “God So Loved the World” brings the centerpiece of St. John’s Gospel into clear focus.

The text is:

*God so loved the world,
that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whoso believeth in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life.*

*For God sent not his Son into the world
to condemn the world;
but that the world through him might be saved.* (Words John 3 vv. 16, 17)

III. The piece

So, I invite you to settle back—be comfortable—perhaps close your eyes—and let yourself be taken to another place, as we listen to John Stainer’s “**God So Loved the World,**” as presented by the choir of London’s St. Paul’s Cathedral—that John Stainer once directed.

(YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5Akz6J8Rw0>.)