

## **18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Epistle reading the Apostle Paul again addresses the Corinthians, that early Christian community in Corinth which we've heard so much about these past few months.

If we look back we'll recall that the Corinthians had two main problems: 1) they were divided into little cliques or factions, and 2) they were becoming earthly minded.

And we remember how St. Paul corrected both of these issues.

First, he reminded them that they were all members of Christ's Body, and that there is one Church, one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism. And that this unity they share comes from the sacrifice of their one Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered Himself up on the Cross that all might be One.

And St. Paul corrected the second problem, that of earthly mindedness. by reminding the Corinthians that their focus must be the Kingdom of God and the Resurrection from the dead. They cannot look back to those things they had left behind – the things of the world. And this is quite simply because no one can look one way and walk the opposite; just as the eyes lead the body, so too does the mind lead the soul. And so St. Paul advised the Corinthians to keep their eyes on the Kingdom to come and that's where through God's help they would arrive.

Now in today's Epistle to the Corinthians St. Paul speaks to this young mission community about another serious subject: financial stewardship.

As we all know from first hand experience, being members of a mission community has many challenges and "paying the bills" is certainly one of them.

Yet, look at the angle St. Paul takes when he approaches this subject of financial stewardship with the community in Corinth. Instead of talking dollars and cents, or talents and drachmas, St. Paul takes a theological approach. He compares financial stewardship to the work of a farmer sowing seed. This is imagery with which they were very familiar with because the Lord Himself often used the agricultural theme in His parables.

And so, St. Paul says to the Corinthians that just like a farmer, if they sow sparingly then they will also reap sparingly – that is, if they don't make a real investment in the community then they shouldn't expect to see it grow and flourish. No one can just cast a few little seeds into the ground in the fall and expect a beautiful garden to grow in the spring. It just doesn't happen like that. And the same is true with the Church, no one can expect great things to happen without real sacrifice and sustained effort.

But then what does St. Paul say? After having just explained that the Church will not grow without real effort and sacrifice, He immediately says, “So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.”

This is very interesting. St. Paul immediately takes the pressure off. He doesn't force the Corinthians to give to the Church. Instead he tells them just the opposite – let each of you give as his or her own heart dictates. And more than this, let each of you give joyfully, without feeling forced to do so for God loves a cheerful giver.

This is a very powerful thing St. Paul is saying, but we may wonder perhaps a little naïve. After all the bottom line is that there are bills to pay.

But remember St. Paul is, as the Scriptures say, a “wise master builder,” having established many Christian communities and missions throughout the known world. And he understands more than anyone what he had just told the Corinthians, that if they sow sparingly then they will also reap sparingly. He knows that if they aren't willing to sacrifice then their mission will fail.

Yet he still says to them, “let each one give as his or her own heart dictates.” Now even though it may seem that St. Paul has just weakened his own position by giving the Corinthians a way out of sacrificing for the good of the Church, he hasn't.

You see, St. Paul didn't become a wise master builder, the Apostle to the Gentiles, because he thought like everyone else. St. Paul had a deep understanding of how to motivate and how to lead. St. Paul knew that he was not called to be a slave driver, shouting and dictating orders to the Corinthians, any more than the people of Corinth were called to be slaves fulfilling his every command for fear of chastisement.

True, this model had built many of the world's greatest cities, yet St. Paul knew that it could not lay one brick in the House of God. This is because the human mind and heart must be free if they are to undertake anything pleasing to God. And the Lord's house after all is not a building made of stones, bricks, and mortar; the Lord's house is the Church, the Body of Christ, the community of believers itself. And whether there is a building or not, there is a Church, and that Church has found freedom from the Law through Christ, it cannot be under compulsion.

And so, St. Paul tells the Corinthians that they are free to give to the Lord as their hearts advise them.

Now, of course, St. Paul knew that some in the community would undoubtedly take advantage of this liberty, not making the sacrifice which their hearts instructed them to make. However, for the vast majority of the community this call to give as their heart dictated was all they needed to hear. After all, they had joined the community because they loved the Lord and they wanted to see His Gospel spread into all the world. The Corinthians wanted to build, they wanted to sacrifice, and wanted they wanted to do it with joy rather than compulsion.

And so, when St. Paul told the Corinthians to give as their hearts dictated he knew that they would respond to the Lord's call, he knew that they would make whatever sacrifice was necessary, and ultimately he knew that they would succeed.

St. Paul knew that the Corinthians would succeed because he saw God's presence amongst them. He saw that there were dedicated workers within the community who would hear the Lord's gentle voice deep in their hearts and would respond with conviction and selfless love. And he saw that God Himself would honor this commitment by providing whatever it was that was necessary.

Undoubtedly, St. Paul had been told what we heard about in last week's Gospel, how the Lord provided for His disciples with the miraculous catch of fish when they sacrificed for His ministry. Surely St. Paul had heard about the feeding of the thousands with just a few loaves and some fish. He had heard the stories of how the Lord calmed the stormy seas, how He healed the sick, raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, and in short how He met every single need of His followers, how He fulfilled all that was lacking.

And this is to say nothing of St. Paul's own personal experience in the New Testament Church – how the Lord worked with him and the other Apostles no matter where they went throughout the world and no matter what obstacles they faced. If the Lord willed for something to be done – it was done. All that was necessary was the cooperation of His people. All that was necessary was an open mind and a willing heart, and these two things St. Paul saw in the Corinthians.

Now for those who doubted, for those who were unsure in their faith – and St. Paul knew that there would be some – the great master builder reminded them in very explicit terms that it is God Himself Who supplies the seed to the sower, and He is able to multiply this seed so that no matter how much they sowed, the seed would not run out. That is, no matter how much they gave – and remember the first Christians sold all their possessions and laid the money at the Apostles' feet – no matter how they sacrificed the Lord would bless them with more than they had had before.

This is the promise of investing in the Church – you cannot lose what you have invested and your stock can only go up. And with this promise, who wouldn't sell all that they have in order to support the building up of the Kingdom?

Brothers and sisters, the message for us is clear and doesn't need to be expounded upon anymore.

Let us invest in the Lord's House with all that we have, with our time, with our talents, and with our treasure. And let us do this without compulsion but with a free and unconstrained will, without doubting but with a firm trust that the Lord will provide, and without indifference but with a loving and thankful heart.

To our Lord Jesus Christ be the glory, together with His eternal Father, and Most-holy Spirit, always, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.