

19th 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 says something which may seem a little strange. He says that he will boast in his infirmities, that he will speak boldly about his weaknesses, so that the grace and power of Christ may rest upon him. And like last week's message about the cheerful giver, today's message about boasting in one's infirmities probably caught the Corinthians a little off guard.

Remember last week St. Paul told the Christians in Corinth that even though their mission was small and there were "bills to pay", that they should each give as their hearts dictated and not by compulsion. This was a strange message for them to hear because it flew in the face of worldly thinking – it made no economic sense. Yet, St. Paul trusted in the Lord and he believed that the Corinthians would step up to the plate. And of course, St. Paul was right – the Lord provided and the people willingly sacrificed for their church. And this all came to be because the Corinthians believed in the radical message of the Gospel, that message which is as powerful as it is new and exciting.

Likewise, just two weeks ago we spoke about how when the Lord first began to preach, when He first began to proclaim His Gospel, He immediately started with the lesson of repentance. Now this was a lesson which every good Jew had heard over and over again, but the Lord's teaching on repentance was new, it was different, and it caught people's attention. The Lord told the people that repentance was not merely about sorrowing for one's sins and asking the Lord's forgiveness, repentance was also about, and more essentially about, changing one's mind, thinking differently, and coming to a greater awareness of who God was and what He wanted for their lives.

Repentance was about education, enlightenment, and knowledge. Repentance meant coming to see things as they really are, coming to see the world through God's eyes, and this meant coming to realize our own personal eternal value and also coming to understand the infinite value of our neighbor. Repentance was a radical shift in understanding, it was an eye-opening experience, and it meant coming to share the knowledge that God Himself has, and thereby choosing to live the life that God Himself lives.

Now getting back to today's Epistle and St. Paul's seemingly strange statement about boasting in his infirmities so that the power of God might rest upon him. We've already said that what St. Paul taught often flew in the face of worldly thinking, and this is obviously the case here because society tells us not only to hide our weakness and infirmities, but also to brag about and embellish in our strengths and strong points.

But St. Paul had a message greater than the one taught by society. St. Paul's was teaching one of the most important keys to the spiritual life – he was teaching them how to lay the foundation for future spiritual growth.

St. Paul was telling the Corinthians that humility is the key to every endeavor in the Christian life. Humility is the very groundwork, that unshakable foundation, upon which the human person must be built.

And by remembering one's faults, shortcomings, and infirmities, one remembers one's humanity and this makes one humble. One remembers that we are men and women who are not as self-sufficient as we might think, we are not creatures who can live independent from our Creator, we are not sons and daughters who can live without our Heavenly Father – there is no real and authentic life outside of God.

This is why the Fathers tell us that the first step in the spiritual life is learning about one's self and acquiring a sense of humility. They say if you want to know and experience God – and this is the very goal of the spiritual life – then you need to know yourself first. And this means recognizing our frailty, seeing our shortcomings and weaknesses, and acknowledging those passions which have become deeply entrenched in our minds and hearts.

Why is acquiring humility the first step? Well the Fathers give us an illustration.

The Fathers liken the spiritual growth of the human person to the growth of a tree. They say look at the tallest and broadest trees, consider how they soar up to the sky and how beautiful and graceful they are. Well what allows them to grow so high and so wide? Is it not their roots?

Well the same is true in the spiritual life: the deeper one's self-awareness, the more one is rooted into the ground of humility, the more one can grow and flourish, the higher one can ascend to the heights of heaven. The Prophet David even uses this imagery when he says in his book of Psalms that "the righteous man shall flourish like the palm tree; he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon."

But the Fathers also say that the one who lacks firm grounding in humility will be blown over like a rootless tree when the stormy winds of temptation arise.

And so, St. Paul boasts in his weaknesses and infirmities because they give him that much needed stability in the spiritual life – that stability which made it possible for him to ascend even to Paradise, being caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body he did not know.

Of course, it was this humility which led St. Paul to mention this vision as if it wasn't he who received it. Yet, later he acknowledges that he did receive visions, and in fact due to the abundance of the revelations, he was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him.

What was this thorn in the flesh? Some say it was a physical ailment: eye problems, malaria, or even migraine headaches. Others say it was the attacks and persecution of those inside and outside the Church. Still others say that perhaps it was the feeling of extreme remorse for once having persecuted the Church so vehemently. Yet, no one

really knows, all we know is that the Lord chose not to take the thorn away because it was serving a purpose.

The thorn in St. Paul's flesh kept him humble, and this humility allowed him to receive more of God's grace and power. This thorn in the flesh stabilized St. Paul, it helped him keep his feet on the ground, and this helped him to be a more effective instrument in the hands of God.

Brothers and sisters, we all suffer from thorns in the flesh. Our health may be poor, our jobs may not pay so much, our families may have falling outs, we ourselves may be struggling with sins from our past, or we may be battling with addictions, or we may be constantly plagued by thoughts of judging others or pride, or we may feel that something else is just not right in our lives and we are being buffeted by a messenger of Satan.

Yet, if we follow the example of St. Paul we can turn this temptation into an opportunity for humble mindedness. We can turn our weaknesses into strengths by growing deeper roots in our spiritual life through self-awareness. And if we do this, in turn God will allow us to blossom into more mature Christians, standing tall and immovable in the winds of temptation by humility and the Lord's power and grace.

Then we will be able to say from experience what the Prophet David wrote so many years ago, that "those that are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish... they shall bring forth fruit in old age, and they shall be strong and tall; to show that the Lord is upright: for He is our foundation, and there is no unrighteousness in Him."

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

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