

Easter 1

I take as my text today from St. John's first Epistle:

....that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

It is quite surprising, no, rather astonishing, to think that when this Epistle was written at the turn of the first century, the problems facing the early Church were much the same as those the Church faces today.

Circumstances of the current pandemic have put the Church at risk, perhaps as much as in the early days, when the persecutions, though sporadic, were aimed at the eradication of Christians in an attempt to drive the Christian religion itself into extinction.

A rather extreme comparison to make? Maybe or maybe not.

We Christians have, for many decades, if not centuries, enjoyed the freedom to worship in our own churches whenever we wished with no restrictions; indeed, that freedom has included religions other than Christianity.

Today, we are finding in our nation a reversal of that long history of the Church being exempt from government interference, and there is now an intrusion by government into the life, the freedom, of the Church throughout its various denominations, even those religions that are not Christian. Perhaps, not everywhere in the nation but enough so overall to raise eyebrows and to elicit concern.

Churches in many areas of the country are being pressured to change how they operate in this difficult time when fear has gripped people of all walks, and permeated government from top to bottom. Rational or not, the reality is that it has forced many churches to abandon one of the basic elements of the Church — personal contact with its members.

Christianity is not just doctrine — it is people who are seeking a personal relationship with their creator that is shared within a family we call the Family in Christ; shared through corporate worship; shared through the Sacraments of the Church.

While circumstances of the times, the threat of disease, have brought about governmental pressure, additional pressure continues to mount within society for the Church to get onboard, to endorse, and to submit to societal changes that evolve more and more in a direction that challenges the Church as society's standard bearer, as the bastion of morality around which society and change should resolve.

We would think that we would have come a long way since the first three centuries of Christianity. But time has changed little, or, rather, should we say that little has changed over time.

The Apostle John wrote this pastoral letter around 100 AD, and the verses we read today are quite poignant.

Much as St. Paul addressed the heresy of Gnosticism, so John addresses the same some 40 years later; and, so, we continue to address this same heresy today.

At the time John was writing his letters to the congregations surrounding Ephesus, where he exercised his pastoral authority and care, there was a falling away from the Church.

It could be said that the *thrill was gone*. The glory and splendor of those first days of Christianity was waning; Christians were growing accustomed to their religion, their worship. The flame of devotion was dying down to a flicker. Sound familiar?

What was happening then has its parallel today. The standards demanded of Christians were becoming burdensome, the rigors of faith tiresome. The aspirations of becoming *saints* in the true New Testament sense were giving way to societal pressures.

You see, to be a *saint* meant to be holy, to be set apart from the world; it meant to be different, just as the Jewish nation was set apart from the world; it was different, and Christians, too, were to be set apart from the world, as Jesus said in John 15:19:

If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

Christians at the turn of the first century were finding it more and more difficult to stand up and to be different from the rest of the world; so difficult **NOT** to conform to the standards and practices of their age. Not that the Church was being openly persecuted at this time, but that Christianity demanded a different and new standard of morality, of moral purity, kindness, service, and forgiveness.

Christianity involved an ethical demand that set it apart from the rest of society.

Now, one may assume that, in that era, the threat to Christianity was entirely from outside the Church.

But no. The greatest threat, the threat that John addresses in his letters, as did St. Paul in his, was from within; from those who thought they were improving upon the faith once received from our Lord.

Perhaps, the best way to put it is to define the threat as an effort to make the Christian Faith intellectually respectable — the first century concept of **PC**.

Contemporary secular philosophy and thought were highly influenced by the Greek world. And the term best to describe the Greek way of thinking is **Gnosticism**. Simply put, **Gnosticism** is based on the concept that only spirit was good, and that matter, the material world, was evil.

To carry forward the Gnostic thinking: the human spirit was imprisoned within the body, and the aim of life was to release the spirit from the evil body. For this purpose, there were secret rites and rituals; secret knowledge that only the elite could possess. And there was a pervasive permissiveness of behavior under the guise of this complete separation of spirit and body.

It was this kind of thinking that threatened the Church, and to which St. Paul had responded in his Epistles, and which St. John addressed so eloquently in his Epistles and Gospel.

In the passage we heard today, John addresses one of the most serious challenges to the faith of the Church: the denial of the **Incarnation**. There was a growing element in the Church that adopted the position that the divine Christ did not suffer and die on the cross; only the man named Jesus, the divine nature no longer a part of Him, suffered and died. It was their belief that a divine being could never be subject to human suffering, much less death.

From the Gnostic point of view, the **Incarnation** in any real sense was impossible. But, rather than belabor this Gnostic concept, it is sufficient to say that, taken to its final conclusion, accepting this philosophy of the goodness of spirit and the baseness of matter, in particular, of the human body, Christianity would be turned upside down, and the death of the Cross, the supreme, loving Sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ would be made of none effect.

To refute this insidious heresy, John presents the undeniable witness of the Water and the Blood; the confirmation of the Messiahship of Jesus — the Water of His baptism and the Blood of the Cross.

In his Gospel, verses 34 and 35 of the 19th chapter, John specifically gives evidence to the water and the blood flowing from the pierced side of Jesus as He hung on the cross.

But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.

And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe.

John speaks also of the triple witness: the Spirit, the Water, and the Blood.

The witness of the Spirit, as when our Lord was baptized and the Spirit in the form of a dove descended from heaven resting upon Him; it was passed on to the Apostles, as we heard in today's Gospel, when Jesus breathed on them and gave them their commission; and it was fully given on Pentecost, when tongues of fire, representing the Holy Spirit, lit upon each Apostle.

The witness of the Water, as in the baptism of Jesus, when the Spirit descended upon Him, revealing to John the Baptist who Jesus was; it was the water that flowed from the side of Christ on the cross; it is the water of our own baptism, wherein we die with Christ, and are raised with Him to a new life, a witness to the continuing power of our Lord.

And the witness of the Blood, as on the cross, the Blood of Jesus was poured out to God in perfect sacrifice; as in the Eucharist, when we receive the Blood of Christ along with His Body in a continuing witness to the atoning power of His Sacrifice.

We see in the coming together of the Spirit, the Water, and the Blood, the perfect Messiahship, the perfect Sonship, and the perfect Saviourhood of Jesus Christ.

We see in the coming together of the Spirit, the Water, and the Blood, the continued gift of the Spirit, the continued death and resurrection of baptism, and the continued sacrifice of the Cross in the Eucharist, a sacrifice once offered for our redemption, for the sins of the world.

John, in his Epistle, fully affirms to us that Jesus Christ is both God and man. The triple witness is undeniable. It was truly Jesus Christ, complete in His humanity and complete in His Godhead, Who suffered and died upon the cross in perfect obedience to God the Father.

Surely, the concept of *Gnosticism* was refuted; yet, it would raise its insidious head again and again with each age, as we can readily see within the Church today, challenging the very core of our Christian faith; luring us back to worldly concerns; enticing us into accepting the ethics and moral standards of a secular society.

John makes as his ending statement that the essence of the Christian life is eternal life.

In God there is peace; there is power; there is holiness; there is love; and there is life, eternal life; for God is all of these.

It is Jesus Christ alone Who can bring us to God; it is He alone Who fully knows the Father; it is He alone Who can reveal to us what the Father is like.

Yet today, the Church is still plagued by those within for whom the flame of devotion has been reduced to a flicker, and for whom the demands of Christianity have become burdensome; who no longer want to feel set apart from the world; who find it easier to conform to the standards and practices of the current age, ethical and moral standards of the world that fly in the face of Christianity.

But the promise in Christ cannot be compared to worldly rewards. Those who believe in Jesus Christ have life, eternal life and, in this world, life in the fullest sense, not a mere shadowy existence.

As Christians, we are indeed called to be set apart from the world; we are different; the standards demanded of us **DO** set us apart from society; and, though, for this, the world will disavow us, what awaits us is the very promise of Jesus Christ, the promise that we each will be given a share in the eternal life of God.