

Lent 1

I take as my text today from St. Paul's 2nd Letter to the Church at Corinth:

We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain....

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.

Now that we have begun the solemn season of Lent, we can think back a few days to Ash Wednesday, when we were reminded of our humanity by the signing of our foreheads with ashes — a sobering moment, indeed.

At the same time, during the Communion Service which followed, we were instructed by readings from the Epistle and Gospel about how to properly conduct ourselves while fasting; we were reminded to be wary of hypocrisy, not to make a show of fasting, not to make a show of our religion; and to avoid ostentation and insincerity.

A lot of solemn warnings and exhortations, and, on this first Sunday in Lent, we have an additional exhortation read just before the General Confession — yet, despite the warnings and exhortations associated with Lent, we can remain certain that this season holds the potential to bring something positive into our lives as Christians, bearing in mind the spiritual discipline required of us. Indeed, Lent can evoke a positive spiritual experience.

As we begin exercising our own spiritual and physical discipline, we can see in today's Gospel passage from St. Matthew, the extraordinary example set for us by our Lord when He spent those forty days in the wilderness in fasting and prayer to prepare — to ready himself for the ministry that lay ahead.

And though we may not actually be able to imitate the discipline of Jesus, we can and often do make extra-ordinary efforts out of devotion and love of our Saviour, and not only during Lent.

Without a doubt these extra-ordinary efforts are made by the Grace which God freely gives us.

That Grace has come to us through the love of our Heavenly Father who gave to us the hope of eternal life through the painful crucifixion and death of his Son, a sacrifice made whole, fulfilled by the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But as we turn to St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we find another warning; the warning that it is possible for us to accept God's Grace to no purpose, where it lies dormant and unfulfilled within us. Again — accepting God's Grace and allowing it to lie dormant within us, not acting on it.

God offers us Grace, and Paul tells us not to waste it. To do so is to frustrate that grace and to cast aspersion against the love of God expressed through the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.

Furthermore, Paul calls us to a Christian life based on endurance.

Now, this endurance that St. Paul talks of is not the same as defined in the dictionary but comes from a virtually untranslatable Greek word, hupomone (hoop-oh-moh-nay).

Hupomone describes one's ability to bear things in such a way that the result is a triumphant transfiguring of the person. It is a patient, steadfast waiting, or perseverance.

Yes, we can endure the hardships of life but in what way do we endure them? Do we endure them, not just courageously but triumphantly; going beyond the breaking point without breaking in the face of adversity and tribulation; indeed, having tribulation transmuted into strength and glory?

In his Epistle, Paul speaks of things by which we are tested and through which we can experience this triumphant transfiguring, and he uses his own life experiences as examples.

There are the internal conflicts:

The things that press down upon us, weighing down the spirit and burdening the heart, the crushing disappointments;

The inescapable pains of life, such as sorrow and death;

And the anxieties of life, such as when the walls seem to close in upon us.

There are the external tribulations which Paul describes as:

Stripes, that is physical suffering, as well as spiritual suffering, for throughout the history of the Church, there has also been the blood of martyrs, and, even today, the 21st century, there are those in the world who suffer greatly for being a Christian, martyrs both physically and spiritually; so often, Christians must bear up under the stripes of life;

Prisons, as, even today, there are people who would rather abandon their freedom than abandon their faith, and we have seen testimony to that throughout the world, for instance in Iran, China, Pakistan, and Turkey, as examples;

And **tumults**, where those speaking out for Christ have been pummeled and sorely treated physically — more specifically, we might say tortured — or whose voices have been drowned out by jeers.

There are the **labors** of the Christian:

The **toils**, as in effort put forth that takes a person to the point of exhaustion, that takes everything out of a person, empties the person, body, soul, and mind, as he gives everything to God;

Sleepless nights, as time spent in prayer or in those circumstances where peril or discomfort make sleep impossible;

And **fastings**, not as those voluntarily taken on but those that are thrust upon the Christian in his toil for Christ.

These things are the trials and tribulations which Paul was able to overcome by endurance, by an indefinable transfiguring of himself.

Lest we forget, there are the persecutions and assaults leading to death, to martyrdom; these continue, even in the 21st century. Can you imagine — today, in this modern sophisticated world, martyrdom is common in many places in the world.

But, according to St. Paul, we Christians are well-equipped for life. God has well provisioned us.

We have the God-given qualities of mind which Paul defines as:

Purity, a quality in itself that enables us to enter into the presence of God;

Knowledge, or knowing what must be done;

And ***patience***, as in never admitting defeat, a quality that makes the Christian unconquerable in the world.

We have the God-given qualities of the heart, as in:

Kindness, a Christian temperament that puts others at ease, and thinks more of others than itself;

The ***Holy Spirit***, or more to the point, the spirit of holiness, where our motives are directed solely to the honour and service of God;

And ***unfeigned love***, often the word used is agape, which reflects a quality of love that is not concerned with the self but rather with the good of others, never seeking revenge.

There is the God-given equipment for preaching the Gospel:

The ***Truth***, and the ***strength*** to proclaim that truth to the world, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and God gives the Christian the strength and ability to proclaim it;

The ***Power of God***, the enabling power that the Christian rightfully ascribes to God;

And the ***weapons of righteousness***, as the shield in the left hand and the sword in the right, having the shield to deflect temptation and the sword to attack one's task in God's service.

Paul, in the Epistle passage for today goes on with a series of contrasts that in the end demonstrate that while we, committed to Christ in this world, might seem to have nothing, yet we do, in Christ, have everything.

When we accept God's Grace and put it to the purpose God intends for us, our lives are forever changed.

As we go about during Lent, utilizing this period in the Church Year for our spiritual discipline, we should take time once again to ponder what God revealed to Paul as ***His Eternal Purpose***, and ***our role*** in that purpose as we accept his Grace.

That eternal purpose of God is salvation and eternal life for all of his Creation, that all people are to be gathered together in his Love; that through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, we can become heirs to the

Heavenly Kingdom by adoption.

Certainly, we could say that our purpose when we accept God's Grace is to begin the task of reconciling ourselves to him who loves us. He loves us, even though we are estranged from him by sin.

Our role, having accepted God's Grace for this purpose of reconciliation, is to act upon it, which will allow us to be recreated in Christ, that by having Christ we will have everything, both in this life and the life to come.

Just as St. Paul was transfigured on the road to Damascus, we, too, in accepting God's Grace, and acting upon it, will be transfigured, changed forever as the adopted Children of God and joint heirs with Christ of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Pause for a moment and think — God gives us his Grace freely, but it is up to us to accept it. More than that, it is up to us to act upon it, act upon that grace, put it into action in our lives. Grace, as is Faith, is actional. It is not passive. It does us little good if we do nothing with it.

That is where Lent comes in. It's a time to meditate, to ponder, and to formulate and execute a plan of action in our spiritual lives and, just as importantly, in our relationships with each other, within our own families, within our Family in Christ, within our communities.

May this Lent be a new beginning for each of us as we accept God's Grace freely given, and put it to work in our lives to his honor and glory, to our benefit, and that of all his Holy Church.