

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.

Well, we are now in that dreaded, solemn season of Lent, the first Sunday of six before we celebrate that glorious day, the Day of the Resurrection, and the confirmation that we too will one day experience the same Resurrection, the recoupling of our souls with a spiritual body ensuring us of life eternal. Not just an eternal existence, but life eternal in heaven as co-heirs of God's heavenly kingdom.

But we do have six weeks to go before that wonderful celebration of life, sufficient time to reflect on that sobering moment on Ash Wednesday, when we were reminded of our humanity by the signing of our foreheads with ashes — indeed, sufficient time to exercise our spiritual discipline to prepare us for that glorious Easter Sunday.

If we recall the readings from the Epistle and Gospel appointed for Ash Wednesday, they were about how to properly conduct ourselves while fasting, one of the physical disciplines we often undertake during Lent. Both reminded us 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, considering that there is a certain spiritual discipline required of us already in our daily lives.

Indeed, Lent can evoke a positive spiritual experience, and while adhering to a schedule of physical discipline can be effective, taking on disciplines such as reading the Morning and Evening Offices daily, as well as making the effort to attend some of the additional Lenten services such as the Stations of the Cross are important too. At the same time, let us keep in mind the gift of Love, that Divine Gift which God bestows upon each of us and shows forth in the fruit of all our efforts at discipline.

In today's Gospel passage from St. Matthew, we see 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.

In reality, we most probably could not imitate the discipline of Jesus during those forty days in the wilderness, though we can and often do make extra-ordinary efforts out of devotion and love of our Saviour in many other ways, and not only during Lent.

Without a doubt it is by the Grace which God freely gives us that we can make any extra-ordinary efforts in exercising our spiritual, even physical discipline.

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 of love made whole, fulfilled by the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In turning to St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we find another warning, perhaps a most dire 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 — accepting God's Grace and not acting on it.

God offers us Grace. It is a gift freely given 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.

While Paul warns us not to waste God's Grace, he also calls us to a Christian life based on endurance, an endurance that is not the same as defined in the dictionary but comes from a virtually untranslatable Greek word that 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.

Can we and do we endure the hardships of life? In what way do we endure them? Do we endure them, not just courageously but triumphantly; going beyond the breaking point without breaking when faced with 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, weigh down the spirit and burden the heart, the crushing disappointments and 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, which we have seen throughout the history of the Church, the blood of martyrs, continuing even today, the 21st century, with those throughout the world who suffer greatly just for being a Christian, martyrs both physically and spiritually; indeed, so often, Christians must bear up under the stripes of life.

Then, there are the *Prisons*, in which we find, even today, people who would rather abandon their freedom than abandon their faith, examples of their testimony throughout the world in such places as Iran, China, Pakistan, and Turkey, as a few examples; and more often we have seen the *tumults*, where those speaking out for Christ have been pummeled and sorely treated physically, even tortured — and there are, too, the voices drowned out by jeers and threats, our own country not exempt.

There are the *labors* of the Christian, labors of love, such as 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; the *Sleepless nights*, time spent in prayer or in circumstances where peril or discomfort make sleep impossible; and in *fastings*, not just those voluntarily taken on but also those that are thrust upon the Christian by circumstances 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 and which is our challenge too.

We should not forget the persecutions and assaults leading to death, to martyrdom which continue to this day, 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 these challenges in 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.

Finally, God has imbued us the equipment essential for preaching the Gospel in that we have the *Truth*, and the *strength* to proclaim that truth to the world, the Gospel of Jesus Christ — God gives the Christian the strength and ability to proclaim the *Truth*, the *Gospel*.

We have the *Power of God*, an enabling power that we Christians rightfully ascribe to God; and we are equipped with the *weapons of righteousness*, as the shield in the left hand and the sword in the right — the shield to deflect temptation, the fiery darts of the Devil, and the sword to attack one's task in God's service.

Paul 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, not waste it, our lives are forever changed, and during Lent, we should utilize this period in the Church Year for our spiritual discipline, we should take the time to ponder what God revealed to Paul as *His Eternal Purpose*, and *our role* in that purpose as we accept his Grace.

That purpose, that eternal purpose of God — salvation and eternal life for all of his Creation, not just humankind but all of God's Creation, and that all people be gathered together in his Love; that we, through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, become heirs to his Heavenly Kingdom by adoption.

We begin to fulfill our purpose accepting God's Grace and taking on the task of reconciling ourselves to him who loves us, he Who loves us, even though we are estranged from him by sin.

We must accept God's Grace, act upon it, and not waste it, for it is acting upon God's Grace that 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, transfigured, changed forever, just as St. Paul was transfigured on the road to Damascus; by accepting God's Grace and acting upon it, we will become the adopted Children of God and joint heirs with Christ of the Kingdom of Heaven.

God gives us his Love, his Grace — freely, truly a gift — but it is up to us to accept it, act upon it, put it into action in our lives, always remembering that Grace, as is Faith, is actionable, not passive. It does us little good if we do nothing with it.