

Lent 2

I take as my text today, from St. Paul's First Letter to the Church at Thessalonica:

We beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more.

“Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Here we are, the second Sunday in Lent, focusing more and more on our Lord's journey to the Cross, in a sense, we are compressing months, perhaps a year, into six weeks.

This is evident in the Gospel passages where we follow Jesus on this journey that leads to the reconciliation of mankind to God, indeed, the redemption of all of creation. I often refer to this as a journey of Love, an expression of Divine Love, God's Love for all of his Creation, about which I could ramble on and on.

By now, we should be immersed in spiritual discipline, and engaged in meditation that leads to a spiritual cleansing; we should be seeking every opportunity to worship God, whether in private, or in the corporate worship of the Church, in particular, where we are enriched by its beauty that draws us closer to our Creator, and where we are nourished by that heavenly banquet, the Eucharistic Feast.

In our present world, there is a growing distinction between the life of a Christian, and the society in which he lives, with many denominations searching for ways in which to accommodate this divide. Not unlike in the time of St. Paul, there is a most human tendency to want to be included, not excluded from society.

St. Paul recognized this dilemma and addressed the issue by calling his converts to a life of purity.

The Church at Thessalonica was of particular importance, for it stood at the gateway to the world. Thessalonica was a very large city, competing for supremacy with Constantinople. It had a long history.

Originally named Thermai, meaning hot springs, its great harbour was once home to the navy of Xerxes when he invaded Europe.

Later, in 313 BC, the city was rebuilt by Cassander, king of Macedonia, who named Thessalonica after his wife, who was also the daughter of Philip of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great.

Paul's arrival at Thessalonica was dramatically recorded by St. Luke in a short passage in the Acts of the Apostles:

And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him him, saying Come over into Macedonia, and help us.

And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them.

For the first time, the Gospel had reached Europe, and Paul was astounded at the number of converts he made there in so short a time, so many that the Jews there became enraged. At the end of three weeks, Paul had to be smuggled out of the city in fear for his life.

Despite his success among the Thessalonians, and the establishment of a Church there, Paul was left to contend with a number of issues, some attributable to an over-reaction to his preaching on the Second Coming, but, in general, the Thessalonian Christians were still very much swayed by their frail human nature challenged by their living in a non-Christian world.

Paul had left Timothy and Silas behind, and their reports apparently were troubling to Paul. So, he set out to do as he was accustomed to do — write a letter to address the issues.

The Church at Thessalonica was being squeezed by the world in which they lived, the pagan world, and, though they had made a commitment to a new way of life, the pressures of the world around them were eroding their new found life in Christ, their perception of the Love that flows from God.

Often, as we focus on the Love of God, the eternal, abiding love which is God's very Nature, we neglect to see the repercussions of our failing to respond to that love, and to keep his Commandments.

We begin to question: if love is God's very Nature, then how can he be angry and punitive? But then, how can a loving parent be angry and punitive?

We apply human traits to God, rather than accepting that our actions, our denials of him, our failings, are our doings, and are, to the One who is Perfect Love, just as to human parents, a source of hurt, disappointment, and sadness.

As Christians, we are called out of this world into a new life with the highest standards of morality and conduct; with expectations that we will be the example for the rest of the world, individual lights going out into the darkness.

In the passage we read for today, Paul is issuing a call to purity, and though appearing to focus specifically on sexual purity, it was nonetheless an appeal for the congregation at Thessalonica to attain to the highest Christian standards.

As a Christian congregation, the Thessalonians were being buffeted by a society in which chastity was an unknown virtue, and marriage vows disregarded.

To these new converts to Christianity, living in the midst of such moral depravity, there were constant pressures to conform to the society in which they lived.

Paul's letter was to encourage them in their new life as Christians, and to remind them of the higher standards to which they were committed.

One of the words Paul uses is concupiscence, which sums up the passage. Coming from Latin, it is, in the Christian context, defined as the “orientation, inclination, or innate tendency of human beings to long for fleshly appetites, often associated with a desire to do things which are proscribed.”

The lifestyle of Thessalonica was centered around self-indulgence to satisfy any desire. For that society, their behavior was unbounded and unrestricted.

Out of these conditions was the Church at Thessalonica born and struggled, and to a new life was the congregation called.

How sadly, we may note, that time has not changed human nature. Even today, we face conditions and situations as did the Thessalonians, that try us as Christians. Perhaps the most difficult challenge we face is that of conformity. At our every turn, we see an expected conformity with the mores of society.

For the congregation at Thessalonica, this was especially difficult, being converts taken out of a society well established in its self-indulgent ways. They were surrounded by the Greeks, Romans, and Jews, each with its own set of standards, and each quite different from the Christian expectation.

Even as then, if we remain true to our Christian standards of morality, and its traditions that have come down to us through the ages, then we, too, may be shunned, ridiculed, berated, even persecuted.

That is what the early Church experienced; what the Church at Thessalonica was experiencing: social pressure to conform.

St. Paul says “no” to that. We Christians must stay true to our calling. However persuasive the arguments, if they don’t meet the standards set down by our Lord, and passed on through the Apostles to the Church, then we must say “no”.

Thousands and thousands of Christians over the centuries have said “no” to social pressure not only to be ostracized from society but also to suffer persecution, even death.

Lent is a particularly well-suited time to consider Paul's exhortation to the Church at Thessalonica, indeed, to consider his many exhortations for righteous living.

If we must stumble over the word "concupiscence", let us do so in pronouncing it, not in failing to keep the spirit of pure living.

In the face of conformity to standards other than those laid down by the Church, let us stand tall, not in false piety, but in staying the course. Though, as Christians, we may find ourselves in the midst of a stormy world, pressured by the winds of change and deafened by thunderous cries to conform, we do have a shelter, the Church, where we may find the comfort of God's Love, the strength of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the guiding examples of all the Saints who have gone before us.

In the words of the hymnist from the sermon hymn:

May thy rich grace impart,
Strength to my fainting heart,
My zeal inspire;
As thou hast died for me,
O may my love to thee,
Pure, warm, and changeless be,
A living fire.

While Lent may be a solemn time within the Life of the Church, it is also a time of reflection on God's Perfect Love and our "bounden duty" to worship him, and to keep ourselves to him in the spirit of purity, not out of fear of retribution, but out of a longing, an innate desire to be with him for all of eternity.

Our Lent, then, should be a reflection of that bounden duty, a reflection of our calling as Christians, and the great responsibility we bear as torchbearers of the Truth, and examples of his Love.