

Lent 3

I take as my text from St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians:

Awake thou that sleepest. And arise from the dead, and
Christ shall give thee light.

“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.”

Today's Epistle passage, the one we read from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, is remarkable, considering that most of his Epistles are remarkable, but from the standpoint that it expresses three independent thoughts that flow together and form a hymn that closes the passage:

Awake thou that sleepest. And arise from the dead, and
Christ shall give thee light.

The three thoughts may be expressed as:

First, Christians must be imitators of God; second, we should not make light of sin; and third, Christians are light.

Each of these thoughts are sermons unto themselves, but taken together, they give us a good foundation as we make our way through Lent.

How many of us have ever thought that we should be imitators of God? Perhaps, imitators of a notable person who has shown extraordinary character, maybe a saint, such as St. Paul: but imitators of God!

This is a daring statement from Paul, but not new in the sense that he is borrowing from the ancient Greeks, specifically in the way orators were trained.

To be a good orator, the Greeks felt that they must understand theory, and put it to practice, and the best way to do that was to imitate the masters of oratory.

This concept of *mimesis*, or imitation, in Paul's mind can be applied to the Christian who is to attain to the highest standards of moral life.

What better way to train as a Christian than to imitate the Perfection of God, revealed through Jesus Christ: imitate his love and forgiveness, his perfect obedience of the Father, not that we can ever attain to that perfection.

Paul goes on to relate Christ's perfect obedience, culminating in His Death on the Cross, as the "odor of a sweet savor to God."

This phrase appears often in the Old Testament, and it has a special meaning.

When sacrifices were offered to God, the smell of the burning meat went up to heaven, and it was upon this odor that God was to feast. It follows that the sweet odor of a sacrifice would be especially pleasing and acceptable.

This idea of an "odor of sweet savor" is also applied to the use of incense in the Church. As the smoke rises, it carries our prayers up to heaven with the odor of a sweet savor.

If we look at the sacrifice of Jesus Christ solely in terms of the Cross, we miss out on the "sweet savor."

The fullness of the sacrifice of Christ was a life of perfect obedience to God, and of perfect love to all mankind, an obedience so absolute, and a love so infinite that the Cross became an acceptable earthly end in fulfilling God's purpose.

Christ's love was sacrificial, and it is this love that we should imitate, as it went up to God as the odor of a sweet savor.

If we are to imitate our Lord and Saviour, we must also take seriously the whole concept of sin.

Sin is something never to be made light of. It was thought that to bring attention to sin was to introduce it into the mind and bring a person closer to committing it.

The basis for this goes back to the idea that, essentially, to think about something would result in doing it.

While God's Grace is wide enough to cover any sin, Paul makes it clear that it did not give the Christian license to make light of sin, in particular the sin of physical desires.

There was a different view, though, that threatened the early Church; the Gnostic view that encouraged sin as a way of increasing God's Grace: the more we sin, the more the opportunity God has to extend His Grace, and to forgive us of our sins.

Truly God's Grace is freely given. St. Paul says it's a privilege and gift from God; yet, at the same time, in contrast to the Gnostic point of view, it carries with it, for each Christian, a responsibility and an obligation.

God's love for us is so great and encompassing, so forgiving, it becomes clear that we have an obligation to deserve that love as best we can, not that we can of our own merits ever truly deserve God's Love and Grace.

That brings us back to Paul's premise that we, as Christians, should be imitators of God, imitators of Jesus Christ in loving and forgiving one another with a sacrificial Love, following the example set for us by our Saviour.

Moreover, if we are imitators of God, we Christians are children of light; indeed, Paul says we are light.

Before we were in Christ, we were dark. Not just that we were in darkness, but the emphatic point of Paul is that we were dark, without light.

Then, we were in sin. But, now that we are in Christ, we are light; we are light, because we are in union with Jesus Christ, who is “The Light.”

Though it was several decades later that St. John wrote his Gospel, we see in it the concept of Christ as the Light of the World, developed more completely.

Who can ever forget the opening verses of John’s Gospel, which is read on Christmas Day and often read following the Eucharist as the Last Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

This passage from St. John, in its entirety, should be read often and that is probably why it, of all passages from the New Testament, is appointed generally as the last Gospel for each Communion Service.

Now, just as St. Paul has done, so has St. John, opening our understanding to the true meaning of the Light.

Through baptism we have passed from darkness to being light; and now that we have made that passage, from dark to light, we should have no fellowship with sin, but take on the characteristics of light, marked by a life of purity.

That purity of life is what set the early Christians apart. They became as light shining in the world, to illuminate what is the fruit of light: good works and good words; in Paul's words, "all goodness and righteousness and truth."

As such, that is, being light, the product of our lives should be good fruit. Light produces good fruit, and this fruit Paul describes as benevolence, righteousness, and Truth.

Benevolence is generosity of spirit; righteousness, "giving to men and to God that which is their due"; and Truth, not an intellectual concept, but moral Truth, as something to be known and to be done.

From the Light, we draw strength to be light.

There is a wonderfulness to this thought of St. Paul: light has a cleansing effect, and by letting the light of Christ into our lives, we are cleansed by it, and we are illuminated by it; and that which is illuminated by light becomes light.

Imitating the Light of Christ, we become light: our souls are cleansed and healed, and we become light in the darkness.

This whole train of thought brings to the mind of St. Paul what is probably the only existing line of an early Christian hymn:

Awake thou that sleepest. And arise from the dead,
and Christ shall give thee light.

Indeed, as we are baptized in Christ, so we are awakened by His Light out of our dark and sinful past into the way of light; and as the Angel sounds the final trumpet, so are we awakened out of our sleep to the eternal life of Christ.