

Lent 3

I take as my text today from the fifth chapter of St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians:

And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto thee O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

What is one of the most fundamental concepts of Christianity that distinguishes it from all other religions?

Paul has touched on it many times, especially in his 1st Letter to the Corinthians, and it was the signature of the Apostle, John.

Simply stated — love.

There is no other religion in the world that has as its very essence, love: a loving God who expects from his creation, love.

St. John said it in his Gospel, in chapter 3, verse 16. We all know it by heart:

So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

That this message should be proclaimed to all the world was extraordinary then, even now, and especially so for St. Paul.

You see, Paul without a doubt grew up in the austere and stringent environment of an Orthodox Jewish father. Discipline would have been heavy-handed, and outward signs of affection would have been rare.

But here, in his letter to the Ephesians, considered one of the most endearing of his letters, Paul addresses love as integral in this two-way relationship — God with his creation through his Son as the intermediary or mediator. Not only is Jesus Christ the Mediator but also, in Paul's words: *a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour.*

Where to begin? There is so much to consider that has been expressed in so few words and, certainly, I have talked about Divine Love on more than a few occasions.

Perhaps, we should begin with the concept of *sweet-smelling savour.*

For the Gentile or heathen world, the acceptability of a sacrifice — to be more specific, a burnt offering — to a particular god was based on the sweetness of its smell as perceived by that god — a sweetness of smell, much as in the offering of incense.

This was true of the animal sacrifices of the Hebrews, the Jewish Nation. For whatever occasion, the burnt offering — lamb, bullock, or dove — carried a sweet smell heavenward, especially when the sacrificial offering was without blemish.

The sweetness of the aroma would be carried up to God and the sacrifice would be accepted. That was what was meant by savour, a good odor or fragrance that is pleasing to God.

It was not only the animal offerings but also the burnt offerings of incense in the public worship that carried the sweetness up to God. The smoke of the incense rising up toward heaven carried the prayers of the people. That is such a wonderful concept! So easy to visualize.

From the temple worship to Christianity, the beauty of the offering of incense to carry our prayers up to God has continued throughout the centuries, particularly in the Eastern Church, throughout the Western Church, and into the Anglican Church — yes, a sweet-smelling offering.

And, again, what a wonderful concept — even today, in the offering of incense, our prayers are carried up to God in the sweet-smelling smoke which invokes our senses as well.

Following in Paul's reasoning, our Lord was a sweet-smelling savour, and not just because he was without blemish.

More to the point, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Cross was an offering of love.

Where the sacrifices of the Old Covenant were imperfect, the Sacrifice of Christ was the *full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, once offered, for the sins of the whole world.*

The sacrifice of Christ was more than just his death on the Cross.

What do we mean by that?

Simply put, his sacrifice was his life, the life of perfect obedience to God, and his perfect love of all mankind. His obedience was absolute. His love was infinite.

Paul says to us that the offering Jesus made of himself to God, because it was so perfect in obedience and love, was a sweet-smelling savour, just like the grateful and pleasant smell of incense, and it was acceptable to God.

Perfect Love, Perfect Obedience, as a sweet-smelling savour.

Paul brings the point home: not just that we love God, but do we love one another, and, if so, do we show it?

If we want that love to be acceptable to God, then we must sacrifice everything that is in opposition to it.

What does that mean?

Again, Paul put it quite simply: imitate God. More specifically, imitate the love and forgiveness of God.

Needless-to-say, that is a daunting task. Yet, while we may not, as imperfect human beings, be capable of fully achieving such a task, the effort truly undertaken will go up before God as a sweet-smelling savour.

More and more, as we examine the fullness of our Christian Faith, we find at its very foundations, love. God is love. God sent his Son into the world because he loves us. His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, offered himself as a sacrifice for us because of his infinite love.

Here we are with eternal life right in front of us, within our grasp. But no matter how hard we try to close it up in our hand, we can't without love, squeeze though we might.

By now, we should understand what Paul is telling us through his own life, in his own words: imitate God; imitate our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

St. Paul has illuminated our mandate as Christians, that we should be ready to forgive others as God is ever ready to forgive us; as God is ever ready to hear us when we cry out for mercy, we should be ready to forgive injuries and offensives; and as God never wearies of endowing us with all goodness, we should likewise never weary in attending to the well-being of others.

We are not called upon to judge, as only God can know what's in the heart of each person.

As we continue to examine ourselves during this Lenten Season, there are questions to which we should seek answers:

How close are we to being imitators of God, of his Son Jesus Christ?

How well do we understand and practice sacrificial love?

How much of ourselves are we willing to sacrifice to fulfill God's Will for us?

And how willing are we to worship God in his House, regularly, where we are fed at his Holy Table with the Bread of Life?

We human beings were created to love and to worship God our Creator.

We, as Christians, are held to the highest possible standard: to be imitators of God, of his Love and his forgiveness.

It is a standard that is forever beyond our reach without his Love, his Mercy, and his Grace.

We are God's dear children by adoption. As such, we are bound to imitate our Father who loves us with an everlasting love, whose treasure we are, and who has given his only Begotten Son for us, to redeem us and to sustain us with his most precious Body and Blood that we may attain to eternal life.