

Quinquagesima Sunday

I take as my text today, from the 13th chapter of St. Paul's 1st Epistle to the Corinthians:

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.

“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.”

When we read the Propers, that is, the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel, for Quinquagesima Sunday, we may find it difficult to relate the Gospel passage to the Collect and Epistle.

The Collect seems to tie in perfectly with the Epistle from St. Paul, the theme being that of “charity,” while the Gospel from St. Luke seems to focus on the idea of “spiritual blindness.”

However, if we first define the word “charity” as meaning “love,” then we can begin to make a connection.

In the Collect, we ask God to send to us the Holy Ghost and to fill our hearts with “charity,” that is, charity in the sense of “love.”

The in-pouring of the Holy Ghost will serve to strengthen us and awaken in us that most excellent gift of love.

And why would we so implore our Lord to do that? Because, it is through love, that we will find peace, and because love is a virtue that exceeds all others.

St. Paul confirms this so beautifully in the 13th chapter of his First Epistle to the Church at Corinth.

But, what about the passage from St. Luke? Jesus tells the Disciples what lay ahead for Him but they, for their blindness, cannot see what He is predicting. So, the focus turns to the blind beggar, perhaps to emphasize the blindness of the Disciples, not only to who Jesus truly is but also to their failure to see and understand what He has just told them.

Here, we see in the Person of Jesus Christ, a resolute Messiah as He continued His journey to the Cross. It was a journey of love, Divine Love; the revelation that Love is what God is.

As the time drew ever nearer to the moment when the divine plan for the salvation of mankind and all creation would be accomplished, we see a determination in Jesus that is mirrored by St. Paul.

Now, when I think of St. Paul, so often my vision of him is of a very stern person, much like the Puritans.

But when one carefully reads his Epistles, such as the one passage today from 1st Corinthians, a much different person emerges. The austere, stern man becomes a determined person filled with God's Love. Indeed, it is a love that Paul cannot contain but is compelled to share with everyone he meets.

We see, in Paul, someone who comprehends to the fullest extent that a man can, the abounding, inexhaustible, incomprehensible Love of God.

This Epistle passage from the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians may be called a hymn of love, and certainly is one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament.

The King James version of The Bible uses the word "charity" in translating the Greek; however, the word should be more appropriately translated as love. The meaning becomes clear when we replace the word "charity" with "love."

Now, Paul begins by declaring that whatever spiritual gift a person may possess, it is useless without love.

Whether it be the gift of tongues or prophecy, intellectual knowledge or faith, even the practice of what is commonly called charity, or the giving up of one's self to persecution for the sake of our Lord, it is all useless without love.

What Paul is setting forth in this letter to the Corinthians is the ultimate ideal of the Christian life, the ideal to which every spiritual exercise and discipline should draw us ever closer.

This passage unveils for us that unfeigned love that should motivate and sustain all our thoughts and actions.

This is love unlike any popular notion. It is not self-seeking; it is not concerned with its own good, but the good of others; and sacrifices itself for others.

St. Paul tells us, in simple terms, that great gifts, and even good deeds, are of no avail without love. What a person is, is more important than what he has.

Whether you have the greatest gifts, the greatest faith, or make the greatest sacrifices, they are nothing without love.

Paul lists 15 characteristics of love:

Love makes no display; is without conceit; is not self-serving. Love does not engage in gossip; doesn't breakdown; is not suspicious; and doesn't give up.

Love is forgiving, is patient, is kind, does not delight in malicious pleasure.

Love embraces truth and humility, is gracious. Love is eternal.

Other gifts serve temporary purposes. They are a means to an end, while love remains the completion and perfection of our humanity.

There are, according to Paul, three absolutes of Love.

Its absolute permanency: nothing can prevail against love, even death, for when love enters one's life, there begins a relationship that withstands the assaults of time and transcends death.

Its absolute completeness: what we see are only reflections of God, like reflections in a mirror. If we remember, in Paul's time, mirrors were made of highly polished metal, and the images were nothing more than imperfect reflections. But love, only love, will draw us to the day when we will see face to face, not through a mirror, but face to face. Because God is love, only he who loves Him can see Him.

Its absolute supremacy: as great as faith and hope are, Love is greater. Faith without love is cold, lifeless; Hope without Love is grim, desperate; whereas, Love is the fire that brings life to Faith, and Love is the light that brings certainty to Hope.

While we are on earth in this human life, our knowledge of the Divine is imperfect. So much is not revealed, while, at the same time, so much is only partially revealed. We are left to use that with which we are familiar, the earthly and human figures and language, to express eternal truths.

The time will come when the spiritual will become clear. But for now, we have faith, hope, and love; these three are eternal, and will continue into the next life. Faith — confidence in God; Hope — the expectation of future good; and Love — the mainspring of Faith and Hope. Without a doubt, as St. Paul asserts, the greatest is Love, for, indeed, God is Love.

As we begin the Penitential Season of Lent officially on Ash Wednesday, let us keep in mind St. Paul's beautiful hymn of love in his 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, remembering that whatever we do during this Penitential Season, it is of no avail if it is done without love. We can fast, we can abstain, we can undertake any kind of spiritual or physical discipline, but the bottom line is still "love."

The highest spiritual powers or the most heroic acts of devotion are without any value unless motivated by love.

And our challenge each day is that when we meditate or pray, we may do so without wandering minds and lukewarm love, so that we may strive diligently to attain to that perfect, eternal love which passes all understanding.