

## Quinquagesima Sunday

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

*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be alway acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.*

When we read the Propers, that is, the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel, for any Sunday, we expect to find a connection to each; however, there are times when this connection is not so easily discernable such as for this Sunday, Quinquagesima. Indeed, there does appear to be a disconnect in that 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, upon closer examination we may find that St. Paul's Epistle passage provides the key to tying it all together, the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel. But how does it?

The key is in the definition, how we define *charity*, specifically, if we define the word *charity* as meaning *love*, then we can begin to make a connection.

Think for a moment about the concept of seeing through a glass, darkly, and the connection to that of the healing of the certain blind man — physical blindness versus spiritual blindness — for indeed, we do see through a glass, darkly.

Yet, there is more as we come to the concept of Faith, perhaps providing the tie, but then, in Paul's words:

*And now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*

Paul in this context places *charity* first and relegates *faith* to a lower status, but when we look at the Gospel, it is *faith* that is the key to the blind man being healed.

Does Paul present us with a paradox? Are the proper in contention?

With that in mind, that is, *charity* being the greatest of the three — **Faith, Hope, and Charity** — let us set about this thing called **Charity**, first by defining it as **Love** and see how it all fits together.

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 this 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his First Epistle to the Church at Corinth which we read today.

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.

Perhaps, we can see in the passage the idea of spiritual blindness with the focus on faith, the faith of the blind beggar, whose faith, Jesus says has saved him; thus, faith overcoming not just physical blindness, in the case of the beggar, but also spiritual blindness in the case of the Disciples and we who follow in their footsteps.

Now, in this moment, 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.

So often, when we think of St. Paul, we envision him as a very stern person. But when one carefully reads his Epistles, such as the one passage today from 1<sup>st</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians may be called a *hymn of love*, and certainly is one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament. More than that, this is perhaps the most beautiful example of prose ever written and the most beautiful expression of **God's Love**.

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* which 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*.

*Love* is perhaps the most complex of all of human emotions. It is, along with reason, what separates us from all other creatures — we are made in the image of God, made with love flowing from God's **Divine Love** making us to stand out amongst all of **Creation**.

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, usually brass, 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.

But we must not de-emphasize *faith* as we focus on *love*. St. Paul himself said that we are saved by *faith* alone; but we may rest assured that this *faith* by which we are saved has *love* as its foundation.

St. John said it:

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

The time will come when the spiritual becomes 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**.

Our very worship of God must be predicated upon **Love**, whether corporate or private.

Likewise, our relationships with each other should be predicated upon a love of each other as members of humankind, God's **Creation**, with each individual being of ultimate worth, divinely created. Indeed, every living thing has been created out of **Divine Love**.

A Parishioner, who departed this life some time ago, would count the number of times I mentioned *Love* in a sermon. On her way out after the service, she would kiss me on the cheek and tell me the number. Then, she would add, *not enough times.* (*RIP Alice*)

Our greatest challenge each day is not just to imitate that **Divine Love** but to incorporate it in our lives, not just when we meditate or pray — it must be an integral part of our relationship with God, an integral part of our relationship with each other, even with all of God's **Creation**, as we strive ever diligently to attain to that perfect, eternal **Love** which passes all understanding.