

## Septuagesima

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

*....but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.*

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

As we begin the Pre-Lenten season, the question might come to mind, what are these “gesima” Sundays; what do they mean and why?

One answer is that these three are a sort of introduction to Lent, an extension of Lent, so to speak, and a time to transition ourselves from the preceding festive seasons to an austere and contemplative period, the period we refer to as Lent.

But in all its austerity, there is an oddity about Lent, indeed, an oddity about any Sunday we celebrate with the penitential color, violet.

If each Sunday by definition is a celebration of the Resurrection, a glorious event to be commemorated each and every Sunday, then, we have somewhat of an enigma in the life of the Church.

Let's just say the perception of an enigma. Only a perception, for each seasonal color serves to remind us of the various aspects of the Christian Life. For instance, white symbolizes purity; violet symbolizes penance; green, life and hope; red, the Holy Spirit or the Blood of Christ and the Martyrs; black is associated with death or mourning; then there is blue which, once a popular English color, think Sarum Blue, now in disuse, represents the sky and has often been associated with the Virgin Mary.

So, with that, let's turn to our solemn celebration, Septuagesima, the first of the three "gesima's", the beginning of the Pre-Lenten period, and with what could be more fitting than an Epistle that jerks us awake with the stark reminder that it is never too late to be damned, meanwhile, we see a Gospel passage that tells us it is never too late to be saved.

Truly, St. Paul's Epistles, written in the middle of the first century, are as if he were writing to us today. Whether to the Church at Corinth or Ephesus, Colossae or even Rome, we remain the ultimate recipients of his letters — it is to us today that the letters are addressed, collectively and individually.

Here we are today, more than two thousand years later, and Paul's Epistles remain just as relevant as they were then; just as powerful and revealing, admonishing and extolling, cutting to the core; and, indeed, exactly what we need in the midst of a world fraught with disunity — within families, communities, societies, our nation, and among nations.

When we look at today's Epistle passage, we see that Paul draws from the concept of running a race, athleticism, being fit, keeping our bodies under control and our minds equally disciplined. This concept of athleticism, Paul applies to life in this world, more specifically to life in this world as a Christian.

Paul intimates, we are in a competition, whether we know it or not, and the prize that awaits the winner is eternal life.

We are not in competition with each other as Christians, as to who is the better or best Christian, rather our competition is with the devil, Satan, and his colleagues, his followers who work to steer us away from the goal, from the finish line, from attaining the Crown. Our challenge is to stay the course, keep on the straight and narrow path prepared for us by our Lord.

How then do we prepare for this fateful race? How do we compete with the prince of darkness for our own souls?

First, we need to consider to what Paul is alluding. In his fascination with athletic competition, Paul draws from the games, from what is familiar to his audience in order to make his point. Our Lord did the same thing in his Parables, drawing on the familiar to teach the eternal.

Paul took note of the preparation that athletes put themselves through before competition. They trained hard; they stuck to strict diets; and they kept themselves focused on their goal.

He concluded that the same principles could be applied to himself in keeping spiritually fit for his competition with the devil. Moreover, Paul concluded that the same could be applied to each and every Christian who struggles against the powers of darkness.

*But I keep under my body*, says Paul.

Here, Paul is not reflecting on the *natural body* and keeping it in subjection by mortification, or fasting, or whipping, or some other physical practice.

Rather, Paul is referring to his *spiritual nature* and the body of sin, the corruption of his nature and the necessity of putting off the old man with his deeds and putting on our Lord Jesus Christ.

The idea here is of one subduing his evil concupiscence, making no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.

That's a mouthful, but just as the athlete brings his opponent to the ground and subdues him, pins him, so we must do the same with our fleshly lusts, and all sins.

It is Satan, the devil, and the powers of darkness that subvert our nature, and with whom we wrestle in the spiritual arena.

Satan is not something nebulous, he is very real. Too often, because Satan is a spiritual being, many tend to discount his existence, even question his influence within the world and upon each of us.

Our Lord himself provided witness to Satan's existence as St. Paul has provided adequate testimony.

Knowing our enemy is part of the preparation to do battle; knowing that he is deceptive and plays upon our human frailty.

Knowing ourselves is another part of the preparation, understanding our own individual weaknesses, our fears, and our yearnings.

We may be assured that Satan knows these things about us.

However, we Christians, properly prepared, can take on and defeat the enemy. Defeat Satan and his dominions.

So how do we prepare for battle and defeat this insidious enemy?

The first step is accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, not by word alone, but by word and deed.

The second is putting on the garment of Love.

And the third is arming ourselves with the Gospel, the Word of God.

Thus armed, we are ready for the competition, more than a competition, it is a battle for our souls, and the goal, that goal we attain to, is eternal life.

We are sustained by the *Sacraments of the Church*, cleansed, fed, and refreshed. And we are not alone in this competition, this battle for a heavenly crown; we are joined in battle by all the Saints, moreover we find strength and comfort within our *Family in Christ*.

This brings us to a stark reality that has implications here and now.

That reality is: we are all mortal. At some point our bodies will die, and our spirits or souls will be released from our bodies.

What happens at that moment is up to us now. We make decisions through all that we do, decisions that translate into actions, decisions that will determine our final outcome.

If we deny God; if we deny Jesus Christ; if we refuse God's Grace; then we are setting a course that will lead to a lasting separation from God. Satan will have won; we will have lost. Our hell will be eternal darkness, eternal separation from God.

If we embrace God, accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, accept God's Grace freely given, then we are setting a course that will lead to eternal life with God.

Satan will have lost; we will have won. Our crown will be everlasting light in the presence of God.

It is almost that simple.

Because God so loves us, he wants us to be united with him in all eternity, he sent his Son into the world: to make it possible for this to happen, knowing our human frailty.

When Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross, our sins were nailed there with him. When he was raised up on the cross, he took us up with him. When he died on the cross, our sins died with him, we died with him: and when he was raised from the dead, so were we, with the hope of life eternal.

Washed in his Blood through Baptism; thus cleansed, we have been made heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven by adoption, *adopted Children of God*. We are members of his Body, the **Church**, where we are fed and spiritually nourished with a heavenly banquet, his **Body and Blood**.

Through the Church we find comfort, indeed, we find the **Comforter**, the Holy Spirit, whose sphere of operation is within the Church.

Through the Church, we are joined together as one Family in Christ.

Today, we begin our preparation; just as the athletes that Paul watched, we prepare to do battle, knowing our enemy, armed with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, nourished by the Heavenly Banquet of his Body and Blood, and confident that we will attain to that goal of eternal life in God's Kingdom.