

Septuagesima

I take my text today from St. Matthew's Gospel:

Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.

“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 today, there is a compelling reason to look at this Sunday's Epistle and Gospel together, for they represent contrasting messages: the Epistle warns us that it is never too late to be ***darned***, while the Gospel tells us it is never too late to be ***saved***.

Our focus, now that Christmastide has come to a close, turns to the reality of our human nature, that, because of the very nature of our human frailty, we are sinners; and we need to do something about it.

During the Pre-Lenten season we have just begun, and more especially during Lent, our thoughts, our prayers and meditations, and even our actions, should be about repentance for our past failures; we should be about examining our lives and presenting ourselves humbly to God in acknowledgment that we are unworthy sinners, seeking His forgiveness.

Thus, today, we go from the Epiphany Season into the Pre-Lenten Season, with the ***gesima*** Sundays: ***Septuagesima***, ***Sexagesima***, and ***Quinquagesima***; a season that is, in a sense, both a precursor to and an extension of Lent, tracing its origin to the Eastern, or Orthodox Church, where Lent was eight weeks, instead of six.

Peculiar to the Western Church and dating back to the late sixth century, this Pre-Lenten season soon made its way into the English Church where it continues to be observed as a period of preparation for the longer penitential season of Lent.

If we were to look at the Epistle and Gospel together, the Epistle from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where he compares physical and spiritual discipline, and the Gospel from St. Matthew where our Lord compares the reward of those who labor from the first of the day with those who labor at the end of the day, we would see contrasting messages: the Epistle warning us, again, that it is never too late to be "*damned*," while the Gospel telling us it is never too late to be "saved."

Here, we might also be prompted to look back at the words of John the Baptist: *repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand* and put them in juxtaposition to the words of our Lord: *the time has come; the kingdom of god is upon you; repent, and believe the gospel.*

No doubt, we are called upon throughout our lives to heed the words of John the Baptist, *repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*, re-enforced by our Lord's own words that the time has come, "*repent, and believe the gospel.*

But, at the same time, if we are going to *repent*, then let us come to understand more fully what that means.

From our childhood on, indeed, throughout our lives, we are taught to be sorry for our misdoings, to be sorrowful when we have hurt someone, and to express that sorrow by saying *I'm sorry*. We have so overused that expression, so much so, that the word itself, *sorry*, becomes almost superficial.

How easy it is just to say, *I'm sorry*, and be on our way. We do it even without thinking, offhandedly for the slightest perceived offence, even, for example, when we didn't clearly understand or hear what someone said, or we pass in front of someone on the street or in a store. What do we say without even thinking: *sorry, or I'm sorry.*

But, if we are to be truly *sorry*, that is to be truly *repentant*, then, we must rethink the concept of *being sorry*; even this concept of *repent* must be approached a little differently. To be more specific, we must look at each in the terms of *repent* being defined as *change your ways*.

It is not just a matter of acknowledging our misdeeds and expressing sorrow for having done wrong; it is much more than that. It is more than just being remorseful. It is **effecting** a change in our lives — to effect a change in our lives.

Our journey through life is a maturing, where we mature physically, mentally, and socially; and more importantly, spiritually.

There is a further distinction here: secular spirituality versus religious spirituality. Sometimes, in promoting one over the other, there is confusion of the two because of certain desired similar results.

For example: secular spirituality is essentially adhering to a spiritual philosophy, not a religion, that promotes personal growth and inner peace. In it, there is not of need of the *other-worldly*, as opposed to *spirituality* based upon our religious upbringing or affiliation.

We see the same ends expressed in religious spirituality where the emphasis is also upon personal growth and inner peace; but the difference is the reliance upon a Creator, upon God, as the means to achieving the fulfilling of a basic human desire that includes not just an eternal reward, but something more: eternal life with our Creator, our God.

While there may be similarities in the two approaches to spirituality, there are also similar obstacles in an ever increasingly secular world, mindful that, as having been created by a power beyond our human comprehension, we possess within our inner being a certain desire to seek and be united with our Creator, with our Heavenly Father.

More-to-the-point, in this present time, even for those who are religious, this spiritual maturation so often is pushed aside by the pressures of the world: family, work, and various relationships, whether familial or social. All seem to hinder us in our spiritual maturing. And, of course, we are what we are: just plain human. There is a certain innate weakness about us by virtue of our humanness.

So, what do we do about it? Is it just a matter of distancing ourselves from the secular world, from the allurements it holds, the promises of individual gratification and personal satisfaction?

Do we admit to our human frailty and human weaknesses?

If we look at our situation from the point of view of St. Paul, then we are to do just that: admit to our human frailty and turn weakness into strength by effecting a change in our lives, just as he did.

Indeed, God calls us to do just that: change our weakness into strength by effecting a change in our lives; and that change is Jesus Christ.

Of course, if we're going to effect a change in our lives, it requires effort on our part. Paul is quick to remind us of that. Just as an athlete, we must have fortitude, self-control, and endurance if we want to win the final victory over sin and Satan.

Our lot as Christians is not an easy one and the road to eternal salvation can be an arduous journey.

Still, no matter when we start that journey, it is never too late, never too late to be saved at the end.

In the Gospel passage from St. Matthew, we see the promise of our inclusion in the Family of Christ regardless of when we start the journey. Our Lord uses an everyday situation of life as He often did to illustrate divine truth:

Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.

That is a remarkable statement that gives us hope no matter where we are in our journey through life: *I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.*

We do not labor in vain. Jesus Christ has given us sure hope in our salvation; hope that we are valued creatures of God worthy of salvation and the promise of eternal life.

But, what is the Kingdom of Heaven? Is it a reward for being good? Is it doled out first to those who labor the longest in the vineyard of life? Should those who take up the hoe last be rewarded with less of a heavenly life?

We first must understand that God does not look at the amount of our service, or the length of it; rather God is concerned that it is all that we have that we give. If we give to God the best that we have to offer; give from the heart, from the depths of our souls; then, it is sufficient.

Second, we must understand that Heaven, that salvation, is not a reward; it is a grace. We cannot earn it; God gives it to us.

Because God loves us so much; loves us enough to take upon himself our own humanity, its trials and afflictions, its emotions, its pain and suffering, even death; he offers to us his **Grace**, no strings attached. He offers us the gift of eternal life.

There is nothing we can do to earn this **Grace**, this gift. But, at the same time, there is much we can do to receive it. We are not let off the hook; we must accept it of our own accord.

That, Paul makes quite clear. If we are to receive **God's Grace**, we must accept it, and let it work within us. That does require an effort on our part.

It requires effort because we must allow it to effect a change in our lives.

That change is reflected in a spiritual discipline that opens our hearts and minds to the **Love of God**, awakens in us our responsibility to worship our **Creator**; endeavors us to work for the spread of the **Gospel**; and inspires us to show forth our faith through good works.

In essence, we receive **Grace**, and ultimately our salvation, through loving God, and offering whatever there is of us to his service.

Inevitably, we come back to that magnificent concept developed by St. Paul that we have talked about numerous times: **we as living sacrifices**.

Whether we are at the head of the queue, or at the end, the reward is the same, given to us freely who have willingly accepted **God's Grace** and allowed it to work within our lives.

In the Epistle passage from St. Paul, we learn of our responsibility to exercise out spiritual discipline, making us fit for the working of **God's Grace** within us.

While, in the Gospel passage from St. Matthew, we learn from our Lord that it is never too late to receive **God's Grace** and the gift of eternal life. It is what God wants for us. It is his **Will** for us.