

Sexagesima

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Epistle:

If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.

“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.”

This Epistle passage from St. Paul that we read today is quite unusual, seemingly out-of-place and inappropriate as we transition into Lent.

Indeed, the passage paints Paul as a boaster, while we, in this pre-Lenten Season, are being soberly reminded of our need for humility, self-denial, and discipline, not to mention, penance.

Historically, the use of this Epistle passage comes to us from the Gregorian Sacramentary, and reflects back to a time when the pope would celebrate a special Mass at St. Paul's Basilica on the Ostian Way, in honor of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Archbishop Cranmer kept it in this place when drawing up the 1549 Prayer Book.

However, Cranmer removed the reference to Paul from the Collect by omitting the phrase *by the protection of the Doctor of the Gentiles*. The Collect originally read:

O LORD God, who seest that we put not our trust in any thing that we do; Mercifully grant that by thy power we may be defended *by the protection of the Doctor of the Gentiles* against all adversity.....

We have often made note that much of our Book of Common Prayer is taken from the Gregorian Sacramentary, as well as from the Sarum Rite.

In its proper context, this Epistle passage stands out as an angry expository; ironically, it is a mixture of anger and anguish, and it provides for us a glimpse into the deep love and devotion of St. Paul to our Lord and Saviour.

In this outburst, Paul likens his boast to that of a fool; but we find in what he claims, not a boast in what he has done in spreading the Gospel but, rather, to what he has suffered for Christ's sake, the weaknesses and offenses. He is not such a fool as to boast in the real accomplishments, which he attributes to God, not himself.

The context for this passage is Paul's receipt of news from the Church at Corinth concerning the behavior of his beloved converts there.

Paul has learned that his work at Corinth is being undone by a group of his opponents, Jewish teachers who had adopted Christianity but had not let go of the fundamentals of Judaism, such as circumcision, the minutiae of the law, and other Jewish practices that set them apart from the Gentiles. From their point of view, to become a Christian, one must first become a Jew.

This was quite contrary to what Paul taught and preached, and they sought to undermine his principle that in Christ there was no difference between Jew and Gentile. They were not just opponents of Paul, they were bitter enemies, and attacked his credibility.

Thus, Paul felt he had to answer them and produce his credentials in order to secure the Church at Corinth, and to secure the work he had done elsewhere.

From his point of view, the Corinthians were being re-introduced to slavery under the law; the slavery from which they had been freed by Jesus Christ in His great Sacrifice on the Cross.

They were being assaulted verbally and spiritually, if not physically, by these Jewish-Christian Missionaries who were undermining the work of the Apostle.

Paul responds to his opponents' claims of superiority: that they are Hebrews; that they are Israelites; that they are descendents of Abraham.

First, as Hebrews, the reference is made to those who remembered and spoke the ancient Hebrew language in Aramaic form, the form at the time of Paul. The Hebrew language had been preserved despite outside influences over centuries, even through conquest and exile. The Jew may speak the local tongue but Hebrew remained the language that depicted the Jews as being apart from other nations or groups.

The allusion by his opponents most likely had been to Paul as being a Greek-speaking Jew, and, thus, of inferior status.

To this claim, Paul responds that he is just as much a Hebrew as they are. He has not forgotten the ancient tongue.

Secondly, as Israelites, they were laying claim to being a member of God's Chosen People, and intimating that Paul never lived in Palestine, and, thus, had slipped away from being truly a member of the Chosen People.

Again, Paul replies that he is just as pure an Israelite as they are.

And, thirdly, as pure descendents of Abraham, they were claiming that they, not Paul, were direct descendents of Abraham, and, thus, heirs to the promise that God had made to Abraham.

To this, Paul's response was that he was just as pure a descendent of Abraham as they.

Clearly, Paul is distraught at the claims brought against him, and it is this flash of anger that makes Paul so endearingly human and real to us, so far removed from his time.

But it is his further response in this second letter to the Corinthians that gives us a clearer picture of his love for our Lord, and what he was willing to suffer and go through out of such deep devotion.

Paul describes the perils and hardships; the shipwrecks; the beatings and floggings; and the perils just of traveling in that time.

Among travelers, there was a great fear of venturing out on the sea. The danger of shipwreck was common, and many lives were lost at sea.

To be beaten was to be struck with rods of birch wood. It was a Roman punishment, but under Roman law, a Roman citizen could not be scourged; yet Paul was submitted to these beatings three times as a matter of expediency.

Five times, Paul says he received forty stripes, less one, that is he was scourged or flogged, struck with straps of calves-hide that were doubled and redoubled, reaching from a person's shoulder to his navel. The person stripped from the waist up would receive one third of the stripes in front, and two-thirds in back. There were forty stripes, less one, so as not to exceed the forty stripe limit.

Scourging was so severe and painful that it was not unusual for a person to die as a result.

And finally, in perils whether of travel or other difficulties, which he describes, weariness, pain, hunger, thirst, cold, and nakedness, all in his efforts to serve our Lord.

In addition to all the physical sufferings, he also has upon him the ominous duty of caring for the churches under his charge, facing his own weaknesses, coping with offences, and facing his infirmities.

Here, in this brief passage from his second letter to the Corinthians, we get a different, perhaps more real picture of Paul, as he lashes out in anger and frustration. All his labors are being usurped by a group of missionaries who just don't seem to get the message.

What is that message? What is it to which Paul is so committed; for which he has dedicated his life, and for which he has suffered physically.

It is the love of Christ.

We have seen this Love throughout the life of Christ from His Nativity to His Death on the Cross, His Resurrection and Ascension.

We have seen this Love reflected in St. Paul, even in this outburst of anger and frustration.

As Christians in the 21st century, in a modern age, an age of enlightenment, of amazing tools of communication and transportation: how do we compare to St. Paul in spreading the Gospel of Christ? How do we compare to his complete self-giving to that end?

Now is the time, now until Easter Day, to contemplate our own commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

How do we stand in comparison to the saints of the Church, not just to St. Paul, but to all the saints over the centuries in their dedication to the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

The Church has always had as its core the Love of Christ, the Love of God without which there would have been no joy in the sacrifices so many have made since our Lord's once offered Sacrifice on the Cross.

Stern and austere though he may have seemed, at the heart of St. Paul was a deep and passionate love for Christ, and for each member of the Family in Christ. The outburst of anger recorded in the passage of his 2nd Letter to the Corinthians is a reflection of his deep love of his converts, his family at Corinth.

This love he has passed down to us over the centuries; each letter of his is to each one of us, not just the Church at Corinth, or Galatia, or Rome, or Ephesus, or Philippi, or Thessalonica. He didn't just write to Timothy, or Philemon, or the Hebrews.

Paul wrote to each of us. He wanted us to know and experience the Love of Christ.

He also wanted us to know how important it is for us to give of ourselves in God's service, and to feel the joy of sacrifice, no matter how great or how small.

In a moment of anger and anguish, Paul has given us a greater perspective of what the Christian commitment to the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of earth really means. He has also given us a challenge: to match his deep love and devotion to Christ and to each member of our Family in Christ here and throughout the world.