

Trinity 23

I take as my text today, from St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians:

BRETHREN, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample.

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.

St. Paul, in today's epistle passage to the Philippians, offers a challenge — a challenge that transcends all time.

The challenge: to imitate St. Paul.

At first glance, it's a challenge that seems to be rather egotistical; but it is much more than that.

In challenging the congregation at Philippi to imitate him, St. Paul is offering himself as an example: he lives the faith and maintains the discipline expected of one who has dedicated himself to Jesus Christ.

Though neither we, nor Paul, can ever truly imitate the perfection of our Lord and Savior, we nonetheless can turn to St. Paul as one who has dedicated himself, eminently, to the effort of imitating Christ.

St. Paul is not setting himself up as the head of a party would, seeking personal followers, rather, he is urging the congregation at Philippi, to look closely at how he conducts his life; to listen closely to his preaching and teaching; and to focus their lives on his example, citing Timothy and Epaphroditus as further examples.

The situation at Philippi at that time is not so far afield from what we find in our society today.

St. Paul was faced with two different Gnostic groups who were undermining the basic precepts of Christianity and attempting to erode the standards of the early Church, those standards that set it apart from the rest of society.

Needless-to-day, as we look at the situation in the Church at Philippi, we see parallels to the 21st century and seemingly, little has changed.

The first group within the congregation that Paul is addressing are those who distorted the principle of Christian freedom. They were saying that Christians were at liberty to do as they pleased. In other words, they took the position that they, as Christians, were no longer under the Law, and therefore free to give in to their passions and do whatever they liked.

The second group distorted the doctrine of Grace, saying that God's Grace was wide enough to cover all sin; therefore, people could sin all they liked without worry because it would make no difference to an all-forgiving God.

In essence, both groups were giving false arguments to justify their sinning; they were twisting the Grace of God, his all-forgiving Nature, and his unending love into a justification of self-serving actions.

While St. Paul is certainly drawing attention to the doctrine of the Church in his appeal to the Philippians, he is also setting himself before them, before us, as an example of the courage and sacrifice that is required to be an imitator of Christ. Indeed, he has spelled out through his various Epistles the character and characteristics expected of a Christian.

At the mention of Gnosticism, your first reaction might be: here we go again.

Well, not exactly, but *sorta*, that is, we're going to relate it to today's society, and how we and the Church are affected, especially in the light of Paul's challenge to imitate him.

The great philosophical debates about the goodness of the spiritual versus the evils of matter have long since faded into the background.

Though dealt a severe blow by the early Church Fathers and the Church councils, it was not a fatal blow; the issues associated with Gnosticism have plagued the Church throughout history.

It has become a reality in modern day approaches to Christianity, both here and in England, and throughout the world, in particular the western world.

I refer specifically to England because of our historic affinity with the Church there.

While we may have come to terms with the concept that not all matter is evil and not all spirit is good, there, nevertheless, remains a philosophical divide within society that is closing at a rapid rate in this sophisticated modern age. By this, I mean the divide between the role of the Church and the role of society.

What we are seeing more and more is an effort to reverse the role of the Church as the unchanging Body of Christ, to remold it into a dynamic, modern institution where it no longer reflects God, but rather society.

With this role reversal, we see Christianity, we see the Universal Church becoming splintered. Gnosticism may have been beaten into the background, but it still has a pulse and raises its head from time-to-time to challenge the Gospel delivered once and for all time by Jesus Christ.

Basically, both the Church and society are governed by laws, intended to maintain order and discipline; frequently, those laws may conflict, as we are seeing today in our own country.

The Church does not position itself to become a theocracy, but to provide moral guidance, and to influence society to a higher ground.

The Church, unchanging as it should be, provides the moral standard by which government should be swayed in providing for the protection and welfare of its citizens. It is also the moral standard by which society should be swayed in its relationship with Church, with the state, and with each other.

How then does all of this relate to St. Paul's challenge to imitate him?

First of all, we take our cues from the Church as an unchanging moral standard. As Christians, we are not exempted from conforming to civil law, but we **are** expected to adhere to the moral law of the Church. We cannot equate the two.

Simply stated, one governs our *physical wellbeing* in society, while the other governs our *spiritual wellbeing* as members of the Body of Christ.

Second, we must seek to understand the *Nature of God* as revealed to us in Jesus Christ; foremost, that God is unchanging, and God is Love.

Third, we must decide what is more important: today or eternity.

Fourth, we need to look closely at St. Paul to see that he isn't suggesting arrogance or disengagement. He is not suggesting a way of life that is beyond our own capabilities or would even unnecessarily draw attention to ourselves.

Finally, we need to understand that as simple as it may be in principle, it is also quite difficult in practice for us as human beings to imitate St. Paul.

There is a reason: our own rebellious human nature makes it difficult for us to put God first in our lives, and everything else second.

From the beginning, we have seen society as being dynamic and changing, responding to practical, scientific innovation and the evolution of ideas. It is our human nature to apply this concept of a constantly evolving society to all institutions, including the Church.

Not unlike those two groups in the Church at Philippi, there are those today, both in society and in the Church, who distort and twist the all-forgiving, loving Nature of God to justify their actions, and they attempt to persuade others to accept their views and their ways of life.

They even build artificial barriers to God's Grace in the Church by attempting to use the *Law of Love* against itself, and to undermine the *Rule of Life* set forth by Jesus Christ in his Gospel to the world.

There is no barrier to God's Love and Grace, except what we erect. While we are not exempted from adhering to the *Moral Law* delivered to the Church, we can take comfort that the Love of God can help us to overcome our failings, our straying, and our sinfulness, if we choose to accept His Grace.

The Church, even as an institution, is a not a barrier; but, rather, is the means through which we can attain *God's Grace*; it is the sphere wherein the Holy Spirit works most effectively.

Even in our own Parish, we find not only a place of worship but also an avenue to more fully participate in the operation of the Holy Spirit and experience the Love and Grace of God.

The bishops, priests, and deacons, in their various functions within the Church, are ministers of God's Love and Grace; they are not barriers but means to help remove the barriers we ourselves build.

Truly, there is no barrier to God's Love and Grace. How can there be, when he was willing to give his only Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. He, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, has removed any barrier. He understands our human frailties, having taken on our flesh and lived as one of us.

We are joined to him in his Body, the Church, through our own Parish as an integral part of that Body; we are sustained by the sacraments he ordained; we are bound by his Love; and we are nourished through his *Body and Blood*.

If we heed St. Paul's call to imitate him, he who has dedicated his life to imitating Jesus Christ, the reflection of God on earth, we can find strength and comfort in the knowledge that God is unchanging, constant, and always the God of Love and our hope of eternal life.