

Trinity 3

I take as my text today from St. Peter's First General Epistle:

All of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility....

“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.”

Just a week ago, we celebrated the Feast of St. Peter, chief, or first among the Apostles, a rock of faith strengthening the other Apostles and Disciples of our Lord as they began to fulfill Christ's charge, the charge to go out into the world to preach and teach, to baptize and to spread the good news, the Gospel of our Lord.

As followers of Christ, those Apostles and early Disciples of our Lord would be called Christians, and in His Name, they would change the world.

Our Epistle reading today comes from Peter's First Epistle General. A *General Epistle* is a letter that is not addressed to a specific church or congregation but to those scattered abroad, more specifically in this case Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, perhaps beyond.

Probably written in Rome near the time he was martyred, that is, about the year 67, the authorship of this letter as being that of Peter was never in doubt until recent times, and for most, there continues to be no doubt that Peter himself was the author.

What is striking about this First Epistle General of St. Peter is the theology it expresses, as if it were a model for that of the early Church.

When we speak of the Early Church, we are referring generally to the period of time that includes the years surrounding Christ's Ministry until the First Council of Nicea in 325, and it is typically divided into the Apostolic Age, covering the years from about 30 to 100, and the Ante-Nicene Period, which covers the years from about 100 to 325.

In referring to the theology of Peter's First Epistle, we take note that it touches on the preaching points of those early Christian preachers. Of those early Christian preachers, we may recognize some of the names, especially of the Apostolic Fathers, such as Clement the First, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Polycarp, and St. Irenaeus of Lyons, just to name a few.

The five preaching points are:

1. The messianic age has begun, and the elect are summoned to join the new order.
2. This new order, or new age, has come through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies.
3. The resurrected Christ, Jesus, has been exalted to the right hand of God, where He is the head of the new Israel.
4. The messianic age will soon be fulfilled with the return of Jesus Christ in glory to judge the living and the dead.
5. Thus, in the expected immanent return of Jesus Christ, people are called to repentance with the offer of forgiveness, the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of eternal life.

These were the building blocks of the first evangelists and permeate the First Epistle of St. Peter.

Those to whom Peter is writing are called the *elect*, God's *Chosen People*, those who have accepted the Grace of God.

To be more specific, the *elect* would be the baptized. This would be similar in concept to the Hebrews of the Old Testament being the *elect*, God's *Chosen People*.

Thus it follows, in the teaching of the Church, and reflected in the teaching of the Church Fathers, that the *elect*, just by being baptized, are not guaranteed salvation — *election* still requires an effort on the part of each individual, contrary to the concept of *final perseverance* found in Calvinism.

The Anglican perspective of *election* conforms to the teaching of the early Church, as reflected not only in St. Peter but also in St. Paul and the Church Fathers that followed.

Most certainly, *election* is a topic for consideration in greater depth, as opposed to the mere mention here.

Now, in the time of Peter, the Apostolic Age, these *Chosen of God* were soon given the name *Christians*, that is to say, followers of Christ, and they would be the ones set aside from the world, just as the Jews had been.

Christians would be characterized by a rebirth; they would be reborn to a new life through the Will of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

While there are many traits that help to characterize a Christian, there is one trait that is all encompassing. It is *humility*.

St. Peter specifically addresses humility in the passage we read today. He tells us to clothe ourselves in the garment of humility. For garment, Peter uses a word in Greek that refers to two kinds of garments:

The first reflects protective clothing tied on, such as an apron; indeed, it is such a garment that Jesus put on when He washed His Disciples feet. Jesus girded Himself with a towel that formed an apron, a sign of humility.

Secondly, it can also refer to a stole-like garment, long and flowing, signifying honour and prestige.

However, it is the first garment — the towel that formed an apron — to which Peter draws our attention.

If taken to its conclusion, we find that this apron, this humble garment, when donned in our Lord's service and in service to others, can become for us, through quiet humility and selflessness, a garment of honour before God.

Of course, we cannot be expected to walk around wearing an apron or draped with a towel. But, though we may, by convention, wear externally the long and flowing garment, its outward sign should give way to the inward sign of the first — unpretentious humility.

It follows, then, that when we are clothed in humility, engaged in God's service to our fellow human beings, we take on a Christian trait that is the fulfillment of other Christian traits.

Humility is built upon love, sacrifice, and service. It is not something we can strive to be, or even *will* ourselves to be.

It is something we become as a result of God's Grace working within us, the fruition of that Divine Gift which we freely accept.

Humility is not something we recognize in ourselves; it is what others recognize in us.

Humility is not self-abasement; rather, it is the giving of self to the benefit of others.

It is not to be misconstrued as a weakness, being namby-pamby, rolling over, or letting people walk over us. Rather, humility requires strength, strength of character.

Perhaps, humility can be described simply as bringing out the best in others; our Lord certainly did that.

As Peter continues the passage, he points out that there are certain laws of the Christian Life, humility, of course, being the first:

There is Christian *serenity*, where we turn our anxieties, cares, worries, burdens, over to our Lord, knowing that God always works for good for those who love him;

There is the duality of Christian *effort* and *vigilance*, meaning that we do have a responsibility for our lives and well-being; we are not to sit back and do nothing; we are expected to be vigilant or watchful, for we live in a world fraught with spiritual dangers.

It boils down to a matter of living our lives for Christ, or, to put it another way, **living our faith** in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

There is also *steadfastness*, being able to resist evil and temptation.

And there is Christian *suffering*; indeed, in our world, suffering is inevitable; it can make us better, or it can destroy us.

Suffering can be restorative; it can solidify our character; strengthen us; and it can uncover for us the bedrock of faith.

Yet, it is still humility that is the defining trait, and first among the laws of the *Christian Life* outlined by St. Peter.

As our Lord humbled Himself to become one of us through the *Miracle of the Incarnation*, so we humble ourselves before Him in love to become a sheep of His *Fold*.

We offer ourselves in the spirit of humility, and with a contrite heart, so we may be acceptable to God, our souls and bodies offered as living sacrifices.

Our humility comes from Christ's humility; our love comes in response to the Divine Love of God that passes all understanding.

Truly, humility is not what we see in ourselves, but what others see in us, exposed by a living faith, selfless service, and a true love of God and all his Creation.

Love of God and all his Creation — the essence of a Christian. What are the commandments of our Lord? Indeed, the first and second Great Commandments: to love God and to love our neighbor.

In this sense. Neighbor extends to all that God has created.

Though we are the pinnacle of his Creation, yet we are not all that he has created, and, we, at the moment of our own creation as rational human beings, are charged with the care and protection of all things, animate and inanimate.

Thus, as we humble ourselves in the presence of our Creator, our Heavenly Father, our love should stretch as far as we can see; even more, our love should stretch to the ends of the earth; and, yes, even more, all the way to heaven itself.