

Trinity 5

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

BE ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing....

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.

Of the General Epistles, the First Epistle of St. Peter has long been considered one of the best known and loved, perhaps even one of the most read.

It is evident in reading this letter that the **Second Coming** is in the forefront of Peter's mind, the return of Jesus Christ in glory and the judgment of the living and the dead.

In his Epistles, Peter adheres to the theological ideas he set forth in his preaching as recorded in the **Acts of the Apostles**, setting the foundation of early Church theology often referred to as the *kerugma* or proclamation.

As we have mentioned in the past, there has been, in recent times, some disagreement as to the authenticity of authorship of this Epistle, just as some scholars challenge the authenticity of other writings; however, there is still consensus among most Biblical commentators that St. Peter truly is the source of the Epistle.

Many scholars do concede that the excellent Greek in which the Epistle was written can be attributed to Silvanus, who had been a colleague of both St. Peter and St. Paul. It is thought that Silvanus took Peter's notes and translated them, adding his own style, with Peter adding the final personal paragraph to the letter.

Perhaps, in my mind, academics are prone to overlook the influence of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles enabling them to overcome any shortcomings in their backgrounds, especially in education, that many historians tend to dwell upon. The clearness and depth of insight in these letters from Peter, and others, certainly indicate there was more to them than meets the critical eye of today's scholars, perhaps, even, that their education wasn't so lacking as generally thought.

Written around the year 67, this First Epistle of St. Peter appears to be directed to Gentile Christians in the northwest parts of Asia Minor, or more specific in areas of modern day Turkey. Most likely, Silvanus carried the completed letter to its intended recipients, landing first at Sinop on the Black Sea coast of Turkey — then traveling through Bithynia, Galatia, Cappadocia, and westward before returning to Sinop.

Sinop is, perhaps, memorable for its inclusion in Homer's *Odyssey*, being the home of *Sinopia* and *Cyclops*, a peninsula jutting out into the Black Sea on the Turkish Black Sea Coast. It stands about 600 feet high giving a magnificent 360 degree view of the surrounding land and sea.

I spent a year at Sinop in 1990 and can attest to the extraordinary view from the top of that peninsula jutting out into the Black Sea. But that's another story!

The occasion for Peter writing this letter was to strengthen the men and women who would be facing the threat of persecution. Indeed, persecution had begun in Rome following the burning of the city in July of 64, at the hands of Nero, as many historians have concluded.

Nero sought to deflect the blame from himself and found a suitable scapegoat in the Christians, who he tortured unmercifully, even using them as human torches to light his gardens at night.

Peter knew that, while Christians elsewhere in the world had not felt the threat of persecution, it was coming. The threat was spreading out from Rome to all the provinces of the Empire. Peter wanted to give them encouragement in the face of the horrendous danger that lay ahead for them.

Specifically in the passage we read today, Peter is laying out the marks of a Christian Life, six sustaining qualities, which would unite them and preserve them in a threatening world.

These six qualities are: *unity, sympathy, brotherly love, compassion, humility, and forgiveness*. They are not unique to Peter, as they are found throughout the Epistles of Paul, as well as in the Gospels themselves.

Indeed, the first quality is *unity*, a theme that runs through the New Testament. There is *unity* in the Godhead; there is *unity* in the Body of Christ, the Church; and we are joined together in that *unity* as members of this Body of Christ. In Christ we are united as one; there are no walls separating us, no barriers.

There is one Gospel uniting us all. There can be no divisions in the Church if it is to stand as a Christian Body.

It is this *unity*, this binding together of Jew and Gentile into the Body of Christ, that provides strength in the face of persecution and the uncertainty of a threatening world.

Even as today the Body of Christ is One, men have created divisions, denominations, factions in the Church on earth, and by embracing their own self-importance, instead of humility, love, and obedience, they have created differing doctrines through their imperfect understanding of the Gospel once delivered.

Significantly, though, Christians, wherever they are, always identify with each other, in that when one suffers, we all suffer; when one rejoices, we all rejoice. Peter refers to this as *having compassion one of another*. The word most closely associated is *sympathy*, the second quality Peter lists.

By embracing *sympathy*, we put aside self, for clearly *sympathy* and selfishness can not coexist. The Greek word that is used is not used elsewhere in the New Testament and describes the state of mind that exists when we enter into the feelings of others, taking them on as if they were our own feelings, very close to empathy, and, in language of the Epistle, it is *sympathy* that Peter uses as the heart-centered Christian quality.

Another quality that marks us as Christians is *brotherly love*. We find the basis for this in the words of our Lord: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another*. Jesus goes on to say that by this love for one another we will be identified as being *His*.

John, especially, emphasizes the importance of *brotherly love*, of Christian Love. In the 3rd chapter of his First Epistle, John says:

We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

Simply stated, love of God and love of others are inseparable marks of Christianity, and the true test of a Christian. Whether a church or an individual, Christian reality is the bond of love: love of God and love of neighbors.

If we are Christians, we will have the mark of *compassion*. Peter calls it *pity*.

In a materialistic world, a world caught up in strife, a world that emphasizes putting self first, individuals can so easily become insensitive to the plight of others, the needs of others, and the dire conditions that affect so many people.

Too many find it easier to be satisfied with sentimentalism, a fleeting moment of sorrow that results in no action.

It is this *pity*, this *compassion*, that is the very essence of God and is so intensely reflected in Jesus Christ in that He took up the Cross for us to whom this *pity*, this *compassion* was directed.

Though we may never be called to such an extreme as was our Lord, and so many who have gone before us, nevertheless, we must strive to emulate that divine *compassion* that marks us as a Christian.

In all that we do, we are totally dependent upon God. We are His **Creatures** and there is nothing we can do without Him. From that, we derive a great sense of *humility*. Indeed, our standard for comparison is God, in Whose Image we are made.

As Christians, we also have as our standard, Jesus Christ, whose sinless perfection is the measure by which we are humbled. We can not be perfect here and now, but we will be made perfect in Christ on the day of judgment. Still, our mark as a Christian is our humble striving to be like Christ.

Tied to *humility* is *to be courteous*. The word Peter uses means essentially to be friendly-minded, or in another translation, to be humble-minded. This leads us to the last of the qualities that mark us as Christians: **forgiveness**.

Again, whether in the writings of the Gospels, or the Epistles of Paul, **forgiveness** is an expressed quality, and more than that, it is a necessity. Indeed, our **forgiveness** is dependent on our forgiving. Only when we forgive are we forgiven.

The prayer that Jesus gave us through His disciples, the **Lord's Prayer**, clearly states: *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

This **forgiveness**, imploring God's blessings on even our worst enemies, is quite a challenge. To put it into another perspective, what if God forgave us only to the extent and in the spirit that we forgive others?

Peter has set for us six qualities that are the marks of a Christian. None are easy. None can be realized to the least without our first accepting the **Love**, the **Mercy**, the **Grace of God**. We do not have to beg for it, just accept it, a divine gift.

As we grow in the knowledge and love of God, these Christian marks become more and more visible. They become our protection. Perhaps, we could even say our *armor*.

These six qualities — *unity, sympathy, brotherly love, compassion, humility, and forgiveness* — set us apart and, as we are indelibly marked as a Christian through Baptism, so these qualities further delineate us in our journey through life here.

No matter what suffering we may have to endure in this world, we who are in Christ, we who have Christ in our hearts, are safe from all assaults on the soul, and have the assurance that when we do pass through the veil, the victory will be ours.

As **Holy Scripture** reveals, we are in the **Messianic Age**, the **End Times** and the **Second Coming** is imminent. But it is not a dreadful time for Christians but a time of expectation.

Indeed, the joy of eternal life begins here and now, when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour; it is a joy that wells up within us and overflows into our daily lives, touching all those around us.

It is a joy that is sustained and nourished by the very **Body and Blood** of our Saviour Jesus Christ, And, through the offering of ourselves in this earthly sacrifice, the **Holy Eucharist**, we are joined to His **Heavenly Offering** in the joyful company of all the saints, indeed, the **Communion** of all the Saints.

We do this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, livest and reignest **God**, world without end.