

## Trinity 8

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

***BEWARE of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits.***

*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.*

Today's Gospel passage from the seventh chapter of St. Matthew is rather short, just seven verses, but it covers a lot of ground; moreover, it serves to focus our attention on the internal threats to the Church, which can be of equal concern with the threats from without the Church. Indeed, we are reminded that the future of the Church requires both commitment and courage in a threatening world, such as ours today.

If I were to choose one threat that I feel is the most dangerous to the Church in these tenuous times, I would choose ***complacency***.

In Paul's day, Christians were far from complacent. Their very lives were at stake for their acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

To lose one's life in some of the most horrendous ways, a person didn't have to do anything but admit to being a Christian or be accused of being a Christian.

But finally, Christianity prevailed against persecution and, through perseverance of faith, emerged strong, and a formidable force in the world.

For centuries, Christianity has found itself in a favored status throughout much of the world. However, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to a close, that had changed, and, moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we find Christianity under attack, oddly enough, from within, as well as from without.

Comfortable in our favored status, we became complacent, even self-indulgent, not that we totally forgot the Church's mission, for much effort was expended to convert non-believers throughout the world.

We Christians lost sight of the Church's moral responsibility within each nation by failing to engage in the affairs of government, under the false perception that the Church must maintain a wall of separation between it and those who govern.

What we are now finding out is that if the Church is to remain free, it must engage those who govern, else it will abrogate its moral responsibility.

Again, it's not about politics, it's about moral responsibility. The Church must be a moral force within each nation, within our own nation, if it is to survive external threats.

Indeed, we should be concerned about the circumstances which today threaten not only the Church, but our nation, as well; however, to avoid getting mired down in the complex political issues which highlight the moral erosion of today's society, let us turn our attention to the crux of the passage from Matthew, that is, religious hypocrisy.

While addressing the Church in Apostolic times, this passage has provided great insight for those throughout the centuries faced with the problems of internal threats that our Lord described as false prophets in many guises.

Jesus, in these seven verses, not only warns us against false prophets but also tells us how to detect them; He tells us what their punishment will be; He asserts His sovereignty over the universe; and He gives greater insight into what might be expected of us.

Now, who might these false prophets be? Putting ourselves into the context of our Lord's time, one might reply, the Pharisees?

Indeed, the Pharisees were a prime target, especially because of their emphasis on external appearances — an emphasis on how closely they observed the Law of Moses, which had been expanded over the centuries.

In a “for instance,” we can turn to the seventh chapter of St. John's Gospel, where Jesus has just healed a man on the Sabbath. The Pharisees proceed to deride him for doing so.

Jesus responds to them:

***Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man.***

***If a man on the sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the sabbath day?***

***Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.***

Thus, we can see how our attention is drawn to the dangers of hypocrisy.

But, in the passage from St. Matthew, Jesus takes another step. He proceeds to define the threat in easily understandable terms for his audience: true prophets and false prophets.

But in looking at the passage as it would relate to the Apostolic Church, and that which followed, the definition of false prophets would encompass a broader range, and would include those who, even under the guise of orthodoxy, would teach and promote heresy.

Today, we could well expand the definition of false prophets to include those who would distort the very heart of Christian Doctrine, and work to persuade the Church to adapt to the world in order to survive, rather than to carry out its mandate to change the world.

The early Church Fathers expressed their concerns about the threat to the Church.

For instance, St. Chrysostom put it in these words:

***The Lord therefore, knowing that there would be false teachers, warns them of the various heresies to come, by saying: 'Beware of false prophets.' And as these would not be obvious unbelievers, but persons cloaked with the name of Christian, He did not say: Look well at them, but, 'Beware.'***

St. Augustine, too, in addressing the Sermon on the Mount, linked not only heretics with this passage, but hypocritical Christian teachers of all kinds as well.

Of the wolves in sheep's clothing, disguising themselves as Christians, as one of us, St. Augustine says they can be distinguished by their fruits.

However deceptive they may be in their practice of fasting, tithing, and prayer, their sheep's clothing to seek favor with others, their undoing will be reflected in their fruits, as in the words of St. Paul, ***...the fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy, peace.***

Again, in the words of St. Chrysostom:

*The confession of his faith is also part of the fruits of man. For he who cries out according to God, with the voice of true humility, and true confession of faith, is a sheep. But he who utters blasphemies against the truth, and howls against God, is a wolf.*

And the words of St. Jerome:

*And what is here said of false prophets can also be understood of all who say one thing in word and manner and another in deed. Yet it seems to be said more particularly of heretics, who are seen to clothe themselves with continence and fasting as with a sort of garb of piety, but inwardly their spirit is poisoned; and so the hearts of simpler brethren are deceived.*

Though we must be ever vigilant against external threats to the Church, scripture and the writings of the Church Fathers serve to keep our eyes focused also on the attacks from within, as well.

Indeed, the Church has struggled the most throughout its history against those within who have promulgated heresies, introduced false teachings, instituted false practices, promoted discord, and undermined Christianity by attempting to adapt it to the world.

Many, under the guise of Apostolic authority, have misused their positions within the Church, sowing discord and promoting disunity. Many have sought with some success to alter the Church to make it conform to *their* lifestyles.

So, we may ask, how do we today identify those who truly threaten the Church from within; those false prophets and false teachers?

They share certain characteristics, which fall basically under what can be termed as *self-interest*, which boils down to teaching or preaching not for what they can give to others but for what they can gain for themselves: a self-centeredness.

More explicitly, they are concerned with the prestige of their position, their knowledge and cleverness, and, more insidiously, they are intent on transmitting their own ideas under the guise of truth.

They tend to focus on externals, on the prohibitions, and on making religion easy or accommodating; perhaps even distracting the Christian from the world in which he lives, from being an active participant in daily life.

But it is in actively participating in daily life as living examples of Christianity that sets the Christian apart from the world. We must keep in mind that faith is not just a noun in the figure of speech but is a verb in the Christian life; it is action, living the faith.

While we, who have remained steadfast in the Historic Faith, have worked diligently to defend the faith, to live the faith, there is one area in which we have had the most difficulty, that is, in sharing the faith. Evangelizing is a real stumbling block for us Anglicans.

In sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we must not forget two things in particular: first, that we have an obligation as created beings to worship God as our Creator, and second, to love him as our Heavenly Father.

We must resist intellectualizing the **Faith of the Church**, while we do as our Lord has commanded: to love God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our soul. Our love of God must reach to the depths of our being while permeating our thoughts, making us ever mindful of the source of our being.

Christian Faith, indeed, is based on love: love of God, love of each other, and love of all God's Creation.

That basis of love is what we find in St. Paul's beautiful words in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians summed up in this final verse of the chapter:

*And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*

In all that we do to defend the faith, to preserve the Historic Faith, to live the faith, we will not be able to be truly successful until we take heed of what St. Paul is telling us through those words. They should echo in our thoughts and hearts as a reminder of what is expected of us.

It is also, this love that separates the false prophets from the true.

Thus, we are reminded that the highest spiritual powers or heroic acts of devotion are without any value unless motivated by selfless concern for the good of others. That is a distinguishing virtue of a Christian, a fruit that sets us apart from the wolves in sheep's clothing who disguise themselves as Christians, yet their fruits are distinguished by worldly affections.

Just as the fruits of the false prophets are distinguishable in the world, so must our fruits as Christians be distinguishable. If we strive to be living examples of our Lord; if we put faith above self, indeed, if we put the welfare of our neighbors above ourselves, giving of ourselves without any expectation of reward; then, our efforts, our labors, in the name of Christ, may be the truly good fruit.

Bearing good fruit, striving in a world fraught with danger, and holding the Church accountable for its moral responsibility — quite a challenge but not impossible through the Grace of God.

Because we are an integral part of the Church, we have a moral responsibility that reaches beyond the walls of the Church. It is exemplified by love — perfect, eternal love to which we may only attain through the Grace and Love of God.