

## 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 something very important, especially in today's world — the internal threats to the Church 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 we were to choose one threat that we feel is the most dangerous to the Church in these tenuous times, what would you choose? 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.

And for centuries, Christianity has found itself in a favored status throughout much of the world.

But that has changed. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to a close, moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we find Christianity under attack, oddly enough, from within, as well as from without. Mind you, from within.

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.

But we Christians have lost sight of the Church's moral responsibility, not just within our own country but 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.

A wall of separation between the Church and those who govern  
— a wall established by whom?

We have come to a point in our own history where we are now finding out that if the Church is to remain free, it must engage those who govern, else it will abrogate its moral responsibility.

It's not about politics, it's about moral responsibility. I repeat, it's not about politics, it's about moral responsibility. Look back to the American Revolution for evidence of the Church's involvement.

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.

But let us pause to avoid getting mired down in the complex political issues which highlight the moral erosion of today's society and 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 who have been faced with the problems of internal threats, 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:

*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.*

Here, we can see our attention 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 versus 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 — acquiesce, accept, condone the worldly rather than taking on the formidable task of changing the world.

The early **Church Fathers** expressed their concerns about the threat to the Church, from St. Chrysostom to St. Augustine, who, 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.*

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.*

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 modern false prophets and false teachers?

They share certain characteristics, which fall basically under what can be termed as *self-interest*, **self-centeredness**, focusing on externals, on prohibitions, on making religion easy or accommodating, condoning.

Actively participating in daily life as living examples of Christianity sets the Christian apart from the world, embracing orthodoxy, keeping 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**.

Our challenge in today's world is not only to remain steadfast in the **Historic Faith**, diligently work to defend the faith, to live the faith, but also, to share the faith not forgetting our obligation as created beings to worship God as our **Creator** and to **love** him as our **Heavenly Father**.

Let us simply follow our Lord's command: to love God with all our heart, with all our mind, and with all our soul and to love our neighbor as ourself.

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

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

Just as the fruits of the false prophets are distinguishable in the world, so are our fruits as Christians as we strive to be living examples of our Lord, putting Faith above self, indeed, putting the welfare of our neighbors above ourselves, giving of ourselves without any expectation of reward; these, 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 begins within and reaches beyond the walls of the Church. It is exemplified by love — love, perfect, eternal love to which we may only attain through the Grace and Love of God.