

Trinity 9

I take my text from the Collect for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity:

GRANT...us...the spirit to think and do always such things as are right; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will...

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.

The Collect for today, is interesting because it essentially ties together the readings from the Epistle and Gospel. The tie is God's Grace.

When we read the Epistle from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we are confronted with that age-old, basic question: are you saved?

Now, who among you is going to say he's not saved?

Of course, we all, who have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and try diligently to put that faith into action, have good reason to believe we are saved. We cannot absolutely say that we are saved because only God knows that for sure. But we who have accepted God's Grace and Love have a sure and certain reason to believe that we are saved.

In his Epistle, St. Paul has just confronted the Corinthians over the issue of participating in feasts or meals with pagans who were consuming the meat from their sacrifice to idols.

The Corinthians thought that since they were baptized in Christ and participated in eating the Body and drinking the Blood of Christ in the Eucharistic Feast, then eating the meat offered in sacrifice to idols was of no consequence: they were protected by having Christ dwelling within them.

Thus, St. Paul is prompted to issue a warning to the Corinthians against being over-confident, even presumptuous, in their salvation, and cites examples from the history of the Children of Israel to make his point.

He reminds them that the Children of Israel, although a privileged people, frequently failed by taking their privilege for granted, by being over-confident in their security as God's Chosen People.

Paul points out to the Corinthians the lessons of the Hebrews in that, despite their privileged status, the Children of Israel, from time-to-time, were severely punished for their misdeeds, such as carousing with the Midianites and Moabites or participating in grumbling revolts.

Paul contends that it's not just having confidence in one's faith but something much more, cutting to the core of the issue at hand and focusing on complacency.

As we know, complacency in society is not something foreign. It's a concept prevalent today in our nation, whether from individuals, or institutions — secular and non-secular — and in government.

In western society, in particular, complacency has permeated the religious lives of many claiming to be Christians, from the most conservative to the most radical. At the forefront of complacency is the false feeling of security in taking God for granted, or, as some may prefer to describe it, over-confidence.

Whether over-confidence, or just complacency, it is still an abuse of the privileged status of being a Christian, and is, in effect, a weakness, perhaps even a moral weakness, resulting from lack of discipline, a basic requirement of each Christian: discipline.

If we are not disciplined in our worship of God, do we not fit into the concept of complacency?

Now, when we turn to the Gospel passage from St. Luke, the story of the Prodigal Son, we are introduced to another perspective of salvation tied to the Epistle by the concept of God's Grace.

We all know the story of the Prodigal Son. It's part of a trilogy of things lost and found: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the lost son.

The son, one of two, demands his share of his father's estate and goes off into the world, where he loses everything through a presumed life of debauchery. On the verge of starvation, he comes to his senses and returns home, where he is received lovingly and unconditionally by his father.

There's more to the story; but the point is that the son does come to his senses; he realizes his sinfulness, the very fact that he is lost, and decides to accept his father's grace, confessing his failings and submitting himself to his father's will.

I dare say that we each can relate to this story on some level but more so in our relationship with God. The story demonstrates in human terms the unconditional Love that is God and because of that unconditional Love, his readiness, indeed eagerness, to forgive and receive back into the fold each of us who goes astray.

No matter how far we may wander and how much we may abuse his goodness towards us, God stands ever ready to restore us to righteousness and return our inheritance to the heavenly kingdom.

Having been adopted by God through baptism and a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, we can relate with the Prodigal Son in that we have come to our senses and returned home to our heavenly Father, confessing our sinfulness, and submitting ourselves to his Will and accepting his Grace.

But the collect ties it up for us into a neat package:

GRANT...us...the spirit to think and do always such things as are right; that we, who cannot do any thing that is good without thee, may by thee be enabled to live according to thy will...

Here is reinforced that it is God's Grace, not our own doing that saves us; it is God who is the source of all Goodness; it is the presence of the Holy Spirit within us that enables us to do anything that is good.

Here is reinforced, too, that, despite mankind's knowledge and superiority in the world, he is still subject to a higher authority, like it or not, believe it or not. That higher authority is God.

God created us as rational beings, having the ability not only to discern right and wrong, but also to choose one or the other, endowed with feelings and a full awareness of our existence.

However, without the Holy Spirit working within us, we are helpless and left without the ability to think, to will, to live, or even to act according to God's Will. That's a pretty strong statement.

But the truth of this may be found, especially, if we go back to the original wording of the Collect found in the Latin, specifically in the phrase *we who cannot do anything that is good without thee*. The original read *that we who cannot exist without thee*. That is an affirmation of Faith, indeed, that we cannot exist without God despite the broad gifts with which he has endowed humanity.

We may well acknowledge that God has created us with free will, the ability to reason and to choose, to discern good and evil, and, importantly, to love — an endowment which reflects our Creator and the bond of Love found within the Trinity — we were even given the ability to choose to love God or to reject God.

But Love must be free, not coerced, and, just as God has allowed us the freedom to accept or reject his Love of our own accord, we are also free to accept or to reject salvation.

Thus, our very existence is dependent upon God and the Holy Spirit working within us to guide us and inspire us in all that we do, say, or think, to strengthen us and bring us into the knowledge and Love of God.

The Holy Spirit leads us out of our complacency into the certainty of our salvation which lies in our acceptance of God's Love and Grace — in accepting God's Grace, we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit.

With the help of the Holy Spirit we can be confident without over-confidence, defend against presumptuousness, and overcome complacency.

Over-confidence, presumptuousness, and complacency — those three concepts bring into focus the reality of our relationship with God.

If we are over-confident, we may presume we are without sin and lapse into complacency, where we fail to exercise our God-given abilities, all of which may cause us to stray from the straight and narrow path to salvation.

Now, we may well have discovered that this straight and narrow path isn't so straight, after all, but, nonetheless, the Holy Spirit, if

we allow him, will guide us along the way and keep us on that circuitous path.

So, now, we have reached the point where it all comes into focus — we are never beyond the reach of the tempter's power, just because we think we are saved. That is complacency, and our defense against such complacency is to make use of God's Grace and spiritual gifts.

Yet, while warned in St. Paul's Epistle, at the same time, we are comforted by the illustration of God's benevolence, yea, more than that, God's joy in receiving one penitent back into the fold as represented by the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The frailty of our nature as human beings does not condemn us but God's Grace working within through the Holy Spirit will certainly save us. But we must act upon it — that is, we must accept God's Grace freely given through his Divine Love.