

Sexagesima

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Epistle:

*If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things
which concern mine infirmities.*

*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.*

We clergy are often reminded of our infirmities, not so much the physical as of our many failings in carrying out our duties and responsibilities both to the Church and to the Parishioners placed in our charge. Indeed, in remaining faithful to the charge given to us at the time of our ordination.

Being human, we are often plagued by human frailty, a source of lament.

The Church relies on us who are in the trenches to maintain a balance between the spiritual and the physical and we often walk a tight rope that bridges the secular and the religious.

As the secular world moves further from the spiritual, so does the commitment to God, to our Lord Jesus Christ, place all of us in greater peril — the peril of giving way to the pressures of societies, of governments, and the assaults against our Faith as Christians.

If you follow what we may call “religious news” found on occasion in the mainstream media but readily available among other reliable sources for news, you would be shocked to learn how the Church of England, in particular the Bishop of York as well as the Archbishop of Canterbury, is capitulating to the pressure of “progressives” to conform to their way of thinking.

As a result, our mother church is moving to accept what is **immoral** by Biblical Standards as being moral by C of E standards, a good example of what Paul is alluding to in today’s Epistle passage.

If we are careful to note, there are many examples of the capitulation of the Church to the pressures of the world and what was once contrary to Church teaching, based on Holy Scripture, is now being embraced by many elements within the Church. We may well ask ourselves, what would Paul say to all this. More to the point, we should be asking ourselves, indeed asking our church leaders, how can Biblical Standards of Morality suddenly become antiquated if not invalid?

If standards of morality and behavior that have been the basis, at least of the western world, for millennia, how do they almost overnight become passé and inapplicable?

The Church is eroding right before our eyes and, again, we might well ask ourselves, what would Paul have to say about this, or any of the Apostles, Disciples, Saints, or Martyrs?

So, with that, we come to this Epistle passage from St. Paul that we read today — quite unusual, seemingly out-of-place and inappropriate as we transition into Lent.

Indeed, the passage seemingly paints Paul as a boaster, while we, in this pre-Lenten Season, are being soberly reminded of our need for humility, self-denial, and discipline, not to mention penance.

Historically, the use of this Epistle passage comes to us from the Gregorian Sacramentary and Archbishop Cranmer kept it in this place when drawing up the 1549 Prayer Book.

In its proper context, this Epistle passage stands out as an angry expository; ironically, it is a mixture of anger and anguish, and it provides for us a glimpse into the deep love and devotion of St. Paul to our Lord and Saviour.

In this outburst, Paul likens his boast to that of a fool; but what we find in his claims is not a boast in what he has done in spreading the Gospel but, rather, what he has suffered for Christ's sake, the weaknesses and offenses. He is not such a fool as to boast in the real accomplishments, which he attributes to God, not himself.

The context for this passage is Paul's receipt of news from the Church at Corinth concerning the behavior of his beloved converts there.

Paul has learned that his work at Corinth is being undone by a group of his opponents, Jewish teachers who had adopted Christianity but had not let go of the fundamentals of Judaism, such as circumcision, the minutiae of the law, and other Jewish practices that set them apart from the Gentiles. From their point of view, to become a Christian, one must first become a Jew.

This was quite contrary to what Paul taught and preached, and they sought to undermine his principle that in Christ there was no difference between Jew and Gentile. These were not just opponents of Paul, they were bitter enemies, and attacked his credibility.

Thus, Paul felt he had to answer them and produce his credentials in order to secure the Church at Corinth, and to secure the work he had done elsewhere.

From his point of view, the Corinthians were being re-introduced to slavery under the law; the slavery from which they had been freed by Jesus Christ in his great **Sacrifice on the Cross**.

They were being assaulted verbally and spiritually, if not physically, by these Jewish-Christian Missionaries who were undermining the work of the Apostle.

Paul responds to his opponents' claims of superiority in that they are Hebrews; that they are Israelites; that they are descendents of Abraham.

First, in their claim as being Hebrews, the reference is made to those who remembered and spoke the ancient Hebrew language, the language had been preserved despite outside influences over centuries, even through conquest and exile. The Jew may speak the local tongue, but Hebrew remained the language that depicted the Jews as being apart from other nations or groups.

Thus, Paul, as a Greek-speaking Jew, was of inferior status. Paul responds that he is just as much a Hebrew as they are, he has not forgotten the ancient tongue.

Secondly, as Israelites, they were laying claim to being a member of God's Chosen People, intimating that as Paul never lived in Palestine, he had slipped away from being truly a member of the Chosen People.

Again, Paul replies that he is just as pure an Israelite as they are.

And, thirdly, as pure descendents of Abraham, they were claiming that they, not Paul, were direct descendents of Abraham, and, thus, heirs to the promise that God had made to Abraham.

To this, Paul's response was that he was just as pure a descendent of Abraham as they.

Clearly, Paul is distraught at the claims brought against him, and it is this flash of anger that makes Paul so endearingly human and real to us, who are so far removed from his time.

But in his further response in this second letter to the Corinthians we get a clearer picture of his love for our Lord, and what he was willing to suffer and go through out of such deep devotion.

Paul describes the perils and hardships; the shipwrecks; the beatings and floggings; and the perils just of traveling in that time, especially at sea.

To be beaten was to be struck with rods of birch wood, a Roman punishment, from which a Roman citizen was exempt; yet Paul was submitted to these beatings three times and to scourging five times.

Scourging was so severe and painful that it was not unusual for a person to die as a result.

And finally, in perils, including travel, which he describes as weariness, pain, hunger, thirst, cold, and nakedness, all in his efforts to serve our Lord.

In addition to all the physical sufferings, he also has upon him the ominous duty of caring for the churches under his charge, of facing his own weaknesses, of coping with offences, and facing his infirmities.

Here, in this brief passage from his second letter to the Corinthians, we get a different, perhaps more real picture of Paul, as he lashes out in anger and frustration. All his labors are being usurped by a group of missionaries who just don't seem to get the message.

What is that message? What is it to which Paul is so committed; for which he has dedicated his life, and for which he has suffered physically?

It is the **Love of Christ**, a **Love** throughout his life from his **Nativity** to his **Death on the Cross**.

We have seen this **Love** reflected in St. Paul, even in this outburst of anger and frustration.

We may ask ourselves: how do we compare to St. Paul in spreading the **Gospel of Christ**? How do we compare to his complete self-giving to that end? What would we be willing to endure for our Lord and Saviour?

How do we stand in comparison to the Saints of the Church, not just to St. Paul, but to all the Saints over the centuries in their dedication to the **Gospel of Jesus Christ**?

In what peril, whether of life or standing, would we be willing to place ourselves for Christ's sake?

The Church has always had as its core the **Love of Christ**, the **Love of God** without which there would have been no joy in the sacrifices so many have made since our Lord's once offered **Sacrifice on the Cross**.

Are we willing to take up the **Cross**, too?

Stern and austere though he may have seemed, at the heart of St. Paul was a deep and passionate love for Christ, and for each member of the **Family in Christ**. The outburst of anger recorded in the passage of his 2nd Letter to the Corinthians is a reflection of his deep love of his converts, his family at Corinth.

This love he has passed down to us over the centuries; each letter of his is to each one of us, not just the Church; he didn't just write to Timothy, or Titus, or Philemon, or the Corinth, or Galatia, or Rome, or Ephesus, or Philippi, or Thessalonica, or the Hebrews.

Paul wrote to each of us. He wanted us to know and experience the **Love of Christ**.

He also wanted us to know how important it is for us to give of ourselves in God's service, and to feel the joy of sacrifice, no matter how great or how small.

In the uncertainties of today's world, as pressures mount against the Church, against Christianity, we may well come face-to-face with the reality of sacrifice for the sake of our **Faith in Jesus Christ**.

In a moment of anger and anguish, Paul has given us a greater perspective of what the Christian commitment to the spreading of the **Gospel of Jesus Christ** to the ends of earth really means. He has also given us a challenge: to match his deep love and devotion to Christ and to each member of our **Family in Christ** here and throughout the world.

Here. Here, in **God's House**, gathered around his **Table** is where we begin that journey in love that leads us to the fulfillment of a mutual love — our love of God our Creator and his **Divine Love** for us his Creatures.