

Epiphany 3

I take as my text today, from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

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 Epistle from St. Paul is a continuation of the passage from last week's Epistle where Paul emphasizes the cohesiveness of the Church as one body of which we are its members.

As the Church has many functions, so does each member. The cohesiveness of the Church, then, becomes dependent upon each member carrying out his own function, regardless of how significant or how humble it might be; each member contributing a task. It is when all of these come together that the Church functions as it ought.

If we follow through on Paul's thinking, we find that consistently he refers to the Church as a body and we as its members, its arms and legs, hands and fingers, just as a human body, and we each have a role to play in the well-being and functioning of that body.

God has endowed us with different gifts, talents, and abilities, that are needed by the Church, the Body of Christ. Our motive in presenting these gifts and using them for the common good must come from the conviction that it is our duty and privilege to offer them in service to our Heavenly Father, and to the glory of his Holy Church. More than that, we offer them in love, a mutual relationship of love: God for his Creation and we for our Creator.

In the passage we read last week, Paul singled out a number of these divine gifts:

1. Prophecy, that is, proclaiming the word of God;
2. Ministry, or perhaps better *practical service*, in showing every day the love of Christ in deeds of service to others;
3. Teaching, or explaining the Word of God and the message of Christ;
4. Exhortation, that is, spurring people on to the joy of life in Christ;
5. Giving, or perhaps *sharing*, in simple kindness, delighting in the sheer joy of giving, sharing in God's love;
6. Ruling, or *leadership*, taking on responsibility with an eagerness that comes from the heart;
7. Mercy, or forgiveness, more especially, as forgiving another in a way that lifts him out of the mire; it is based on love, not on superiority.

But, as we find in the passage for today, there is more. Not only is the Church dependent upon our functions as its members, members of the Body of Christ; more than that, this membership requires of us to live in harmony with our neighbors. This harmony is predicated upon the spirit of love, of sympathy, and of regard for others, fulfilling our relationships, one with one another, and with our Creator and Heavenly Father.

And, as we strive to live in harmony with our neighbors, there are certain divine expectations of us.

Paul begins with the admonition to: ***Be not wise in your own conceit***, which he follows with a warning against taking revenge, as well as advising us to be transparent in our behavior, and to ***live peaceably with all men***.

The Church, as Paul brings to light, has made it possible to enter into a new and different relationship with our neighbors, a relationship unheard of before the New Covenant in Christ; a relationship based on a new Law, the ***Law of Love***.

The distinction of individual status has been done away within the Church. There is a new standard which leaves judgment to God; master and slave could now sit together; saintliness is not predicated upon wealth, rank, or birth.

Within the world, there may be distinction of person, but within the Realm of God, there is none. A difficult concept, indeed, a concept with which the Church has struggled throughout the ages, for the worldly oftentimes creeps into the sphere of the Church.

In our new relationship within and without the Church, Paul exhorts us to be transparent in our conduct. Our Christian character must show forth for all to see, and our conduct must set the example.

What is expected of a Christian is the reflection of the Love of God brought to light through his Son, Jesus Christ. Our demeanor should depict Christianity in this light, not with harshness and high-handedness, but with the joy and beauty that it brings to all the world.

In the light of our new relationship, we are to live in peace with everyone, that is, as Paul has qualified it, if it is possible, and as far as we can. Indeed, we are human and as human fraught with frailty.

To live peaceably is not to be equated to an easy-going tolerance of anything and everything, for there will always be battles to be fought and principles to be defended; but, be at peace, in control of temper and distanced from criticism and discouragement of others, striving for a life of ***goodness***.

And, finally, keep our thoughts devoid of vengeance, for vengeance belongs only to God. We should treat people with kindness, which has the power to move people and to reach into their hearts. To stoop to vengeance is to allow ourselves to be conquered by evil. Hatred is self-destructive, while the best way to destroy an enemy is to make them a friend.

This, especially in these times, is a difficult concept to grasp.

Loving our enemies does not mean to allow them to take advantage of us. The principles for which a Christian fights are not up for compromise. What is immutable is immutable.

We are reminded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ that all of God's Creation is of worth despite the depths of iniquity to which it may be reduced or the despair to which it may be subjected.

What God has created is innately beautiful, even the pinnacle of creation, humankind, and, though for us, perfection is elusive, it remains an aspiration, unattainable in this life yet what every Christian seeks.

No doubt, St. Paul has given us some rather strenuous marching orders. Though challenging, what he sets forth is not impossible in our new relationship with God through the New Covenant in Christ and as members of his Body, the Church.

Indeed, as members of the Body of Christ, we have at our disposal all the tools necessary to enable us to be transparent in our faith, to live in peace, and to overcome evil with good.

We have the gifts of God's Grace and Love; the strength and inspiration of the Holy Spirit; we have the Sacraments of the Church, wherein our Lord Jesus Christ is ever present; and we have the love and fellowship of our Family in Christ.

Our mandate, elaborated by St. Paul, begins within the Body of Christ, where we offer ourselves in service, a service that extends out into the world. If we allow the greater Body, the Church, the Body of Christ to weaken through our neglect; it follows, then, that we will fall far short in fulfilling our Christian mandate, those two great commandments: to love God and to love our neighbor.

Today, the Body of Christ needs its members, strong and healthy, ready for its defense and, more especially, ready to carry the Light of Christ into a darkened world where love is wanting, and neighborliness is becoming extinct.