

Trinity 18

I take as my text today from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians:

I THANK my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ....

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto thee O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

The passage for today's Epistle is rather short, just six verses extracted from Paul's Letter to the Church at Corinth. However, as we shall see, it is a very powerful passage though it is essentially an extension of Paul's greeting, a greeting that is characteristic of his Epistles.

Let's begin, as we did last week with the Epistle to the Ephesians, with some background that may shed a little light on this letter Paul has written to the Corinthians.

Corinth was a city in Greece, a city with no little reputation for bad behavior. It was a trading center, a crossroads, and a wealthy one, also a hotbed of vice. Corinthians were known for drunkenness, among other things, and the name, Corinthian, in the known world of that time, had become synonymous with drunkard.

It was a challenging place for Paul, where he did find much success, and where he spent a great deal of time, which this contentious congregation seemed to require.

The Church at Corinth was prone to backsliding, to bickering, and to divisiveness, oft returning to their old devices and vices. For the Apostle, the Corinthians brought moments of joy and, more often, moments of heartbreak and frustration.

Most scholars have proposed that the two Epistles to the Corinthians were written while Paul was in Ephesus, around the year 55, and are a patchwork of perhaps four or five letters put together from various fragments. They suggest that a little rearranging of the letters would make more sense to the present-day reader and reflect more clearly the order in which they were presumed to have been written.

Regardless, what we know is that Paul was trying to cope with major divisions within the Church at Corinth. It had split into sects and parties, each attaching themselves to various leaders and teachers. Of course, it wasn't all that simple, and Paul took great effort in writing to the congregation there, and even visiting at least twice, as we can best discern, perhaps more, as Corinth was only a short trip by ship from Ephesus, in those days about three days sailing.

Much of the two letters is taken up with admonishing the congregation, and reiterating standards of conduct, going into detail on such as marriage, and relationships between men and women, admonishing and extolling.

Paul further defines the gifts of the spirit which he alludes to in the letter's greeting. And he provides one of the most beautiful passages of all his letters in the chapter on Charity, chapter 13.

With that, let us turn to today's passage, from the first chapter of Paul's first Letter to the Church at Corinth.

The passage skips over the initial, standard greeting from the Apostle and begins with Paul telling the Corinthians that he thanks God always on their behalf; he thanks God for bestowing his grace upon them, here reiterating the power of God's Grace, and the expectation that comes with it.

This Grace they have freely accepted, just as it was freely given. With it they are enriched by Jesus Christ, and with it they are sustained. They are plentifully and abundantly provided for by our Lord, enriched beyond all measure.

However, this enrichment is not material but spiritual.

First, in all utterance, in that they were wonderfully qualified to preach the Gospel to others, and they had the gifts of the Spirit, even to speak with divers tongues. Secondly, in all knowledge, filled with spiritual understanding of the truth and doctrine of Jesus Christ, the person, the office, and the grace of our Lord.

All this, Paul confirms, was established among them: the gifts of the Spirit that he defines later on in the Epistle as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, divers kinds of tongues, and interpretation of tongues.

All a confirmation of the Gospel as a testimony to the deity of Christ: that he is God. A confirmation of his incarnation, his obedience, sufferings, and death; his resurrection from the dead, ascension to heaven, session at God's right hand, and intercession for the saints; to redemption by his blood, justification by his righteousness, pardon and atonement of sin by his sacrifice, and complete salvation by his obedience and death.

This, all of this had been preached among them, and attested to by signs and miracles, confirmed again by the internal power and energy of the Spirit.

Paul assures them they were not lacking in the gifts bestowed upon them.

But the key point is that these gifts were the product of God's Grace, given freely in love. This is a point we should always remember: every gift of God is freely given by Grace in Love.

Try as we might, we cannot earn, purchase, or even steal a single gift from God. We must accept them.

And that's not as easy as it might seem.

In order to accept a gift from God, we must first struggle with our own very human nature: struggle to expose our souls, our hearts, our minds by stripping away the self-centeredness, the ego, that dominates our free-will; and embrace a selflessness that is reflective of our Lord and Saviour.

How wonderful it is that God offers us his Grace and Love with no strings attached.

How awfully challenging it is to accept.

God does not demand that we love him. He simply loves us. We can accept his Love, or we can reject his Love.

His Love flows from an eternal spring, overflowing and welling up within our hearts when we do accept.

What is curious, rather, what is miraculous, is that when we accept his Love, his Grace, a huge burden is lifted; our souls are lightened; our hearts are overwhelmed with joy; and our thoughts become his thoughts.

To borrow from Shakespeare's language: all the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune are suddenly repelled, and we are no longer players on a stage; we are now the adopted sons and daughters of a heavenly Father, and heirs to eternal life.

Love is the foundation of that relationship that exists from God to us, and from us to God.

It is the foundation of our relationships with each other.

But it is God's Grace that makes all things possible through Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ, God's Love is fully revealed, the Love that has been from the beginning, and always will be.

In the Church, the Body of Christ, we see that Love at work through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We see in all of creation but a tiny example of God's power, and majesty, and promise of something even more awe-inspiring that awaits those who accept his Grace and embrace his Love.

Here, I, too, thank God on your behalf, for I see in each of you the gift of Grace and the Love of God in all its abundance, and in all its potential, so evident in your caring for each other. Even so, it is up to you, up to us, to make it grow and produce fruit.

Yes, make these gifts grow and produce fruit simply by watering them with faith, and nurturing them with love; cultivating them through worship and the sacraments of the Church at every opportunity; and spreading their fruit through deeds, remembering that our storehouse is in heaven, and there is where our true treasure dwells, the eternal proof of our labors in Christ Jesus: the proof that we have accepted and received God's Gift of Grace and his Love. Not just that we have received them but also have grasped them, incorporated them into our lives, and acted upon them: the Gift of Grace and the Love of God.