

Epiphany 1  
Epistle 2019

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

....be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, Will of God.

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

Here, we are in God's House, not as strangers but as family, gathered together to worship our Heavenly Father and to share in food and drink from his table, the Altar. We are here, about our Father's business, where we receive his Word through the reading of Scripture and the homily given from the pulpit.

So it was with our Lord as we heard in today's Gospel from St. Luke.

“How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?”

By what we were taught as children, such a statement to our parents might well be considered impertinent. But it was not out of any disrespect, Jesus said: “How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?”

Indeed. the propers for this First Sunday after Epiphany, the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel, tie together in bringing fuller meaning to the statement that the young Jesus made to His parents when they found Him in the Temple.

Perhaps, because of their special and close relationship with Jesus as His earthly parents, Mary and Joseph seemed to have forgotten just Who this child was. Yes, He was their son but He was also the Son of God, and as He grew and matured in His humanity, He also became more and more aware of Who He was.

Quite possibly. it was at this moment that Jesus became all the more aware of Who He was. He would have been 12 years-old and attending the Passover for the first time. There He was, in the Temple joining in the usual discussions that take place there, while His family was searching for Him.

The occasion might be misunderstood if one did not know how people traveled in those days. It would be much like a caravan, an ancient version of Wagon Train, as we vintage Parishioners might recall. Friends, neighbors, and relatives would all be together, and it would be natural for the youngsters to be scattered throughout the “train,” enjoying the journey as children would.

Mary probably thought Jesus was with Joseph, while Joseph may have thought Jesus was with Mary, or with another relative or family friend. When they finally find Jesus in the temple, Mary’s first words would be much like we might say: “We’ve been worried about you. Your father and I have looked everywhere for you.”

From the account of St. Luke, an account that must surely have come from Mary herself, we see the young Jesus taking her words, and transferring Joseph as father to God as Father. Did they not understand that He must be about His Father’s business, there in the Temple, in God’s House.

Though we have no record of His childhood except for this one passage from St. Luke, we can easily assume that He was a loving, obedient, and respectful child, and that His self-knowledge of Who He was, was kept close until the time was right.

The passage from Luke is very telling. It serves as an indictment of our very own lives. Couldn't we not easily say, "wist we not that we must be about our Heavenly Father's business?"

But, what is that business that we should be about?

The Gospel raises the question, and the Collect and Epistle give us a glimpse at the answer.

The Collect leads us to what follows in Paul's Epistle, for we pray that we may both perceive and know what things we ought to do. Moreover, we pray that we may have the grace and power to do the same.

In the context of the Epistle and Gospel lessons for today, the Collect is a powerful reminder of our basic obligation as Christians: to worship God through prayer.

Through prayer, we beseech our Heavenly Father, not for earthly gifts but for spiritual gifts. We need to know what we ought to do to please and serve Him, so we go to Him the best way that we can, in prayer.

Not only do we need to know, should want to know, what His Will is for us, we also need the grace and power to fulfill His Will for us, to do those things for which our lives were intended.

As we move to the Epistle passage from Paul, we gain some insight into what might be called a generic formula for all Christians. It is what we would call a practical exhortation, and it forms a basis for Christian living in this world.

....Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, Will of God.

Truly, God will reveal to us through prayer what His Will is for us, individually, what His Plan is for our lives; but here, in this Letter to the Romans, Paul gives us a broader view of the Christian Ethic under three broad principles:

First, the dedication of the whole of our lives to God's service;  
Second, the conforming of our will to God's Will;

And third, the integration of ourselves as responsible members of the Body of Christ.

Not one of these principles is easy, and all three are interdependent, requiring a certain sacrifice: not a sacrifice that ends in death, but a "living sacrifice."

These same words are found in the Holy Eucharist during the Consecration:

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee...

In Old Testament times, the essence of the sacrifice was not in the death of the victim, but in the "offering of life" to God, symbolized in animal sacrifices by the presentation of the victim's blood. The blood was life, and the offering was of one life for another.

Under the Old Law, the Old Testament, we could not; indeed it would be impossible for us, to offer ourselves as "living sacrifices."

It was not until Jesus, in fulfilling the redemptive process for all of God's Creation, poured out His Blood from the Cross that we could be freed from the bondage of the Old Law, and be made subject to a new Law, the Law of Love.

Through baptism we are in Jesus Christ, no longer subject to the Old Law, but rather to the Law of Love, members of the Body of Christ, and, therefore subject to new possibilities which include the capability of being "living sacrifices."

Living Sacrifices: by that, we have the potential through Jesus Christ to offer ourselves to God, offer our lives to the fulfillment of His Will for us, that we may become what God has intended us to be, heirs to the kingdom as His adopted sons and daughters.

As members of the Body of Christ, and heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven, we then, must recognize our responsibility and obligation to dedicate the whole of our lives to God as "living sacrifices," embracing a transformation of our lives as we merge our wills with His Will.

But, again, how do we know what is God's Will for us? How do I know what God wants me to do with my life so that I am fulfilling His Will for me?

The Collect for this Sunday anticipates our "unknowing." It gives us the words and inspiration to ask God to:

...mercifully receive the prayers of thy people who call upon thee; and grant that they may both perceive and know what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to fulfill the same...

We ask, and God answers. Through our faith in Him as Creator; through faith in Jesus Christ as our Redeemer; and through faith in the Holy Spirit who sanctifies and strengthens us: it is through Faith that God's Will will be revealed to us as we bow down to Him in prayer.

It is through faith that our lives will be shaped; that we will be strengthened; that we will be enlightened; it is through faith that we will be transformed; and it is through faith that we will have the final victory.

And where best to begin our personal journey in Faith than in God's House, not just God's House but our adopted Home. With our adopted Brothers and Sisters in Christ, as a Family in Christ, we sustain each other as we offer to God our very best, our souls and bodies, our very being.

In return, we receive the abundance of his Mercy and Grace, and are sustained in our journey with the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation, the Body and Blood of Christ, here in our adopted Home, God's House.