

Septuagesima

I take as my text today, from St. Paul's First Letter to the Church at Corinth:

...but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection; lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

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

Today, we begin the Pre-Lenten season, an extension of Lent, so to speak.

We might say that this Sunday and the next two are a sort of introduction to Lent, and, perhaps, an opportune time to transition ourselves from the festive seasons of Christmas and Epiphany to a rather austere and contemplative period.

And, what a more fitting beginning than with an Epistle that tells us it is never too late to be damned, and a Gospel that tells us it is never too late to be saved.

Today, we will take up St. Paul's Epistle, where, notably, we find that even though he wrote in the middle of the first century, it is as if he were writing to us today. Whether to the Church at Corinth or Ephesus, Colossae or even Rome, we remain the ultimate recipients of his letters.

Indeed, more than two thousand years later, Paul's Epistles remain just as relevant today as they were then; just as powerful and revealing, admonishing and extolling, cutting to the core

In today's Epistle passage, Paul draws from the concept of running a race, athleticism, being fit, keeping our bodies under control and our minds equally disciplined. He applies this concept to life in this world, more specifically to life in this world as a Christian. Whether we know it or not, Paul intimates, we are in a competition, and the prize that awaits the winner is eternal life.

We're not in competition with each other as Christians, as to who is the better or best Christian, rather we are competing with the devil, Satan, and his followers. Theirs is to steer us away from the goal, from the finish line, from attaining the Crown. Ours is to stay the course, keep on the straight and narrow path prepared for us by our Lord.

How then do we prepare for this fateful race? How do we compete with the prince of darkness for our own souls?

Perhaps, first, we need to understand to what Paul is alluding. Most certainly, in his fascination with athletic competition, Paul draws from the games, from what is familiar to his audience, in order to make his point. Our Lord did the same thing in His Parables, drawing on the familiar to teach the eternal.

Paul took note of the preparation that athletes put themselves through before competition. They trained hard; they stuck to strict diets; and they kept themselves focused on their goal.

He concluded that the same principles could be applied to himself in keeping spiritually fit for his competition with the devil. Indeed, the same could be applied to each and every Christian who struggles against the powers of darkness.

“But I keep under my body,” says Paul.

Here, Paul is not reflecting on the natural body and keeping it in subjection by mortification, or fasting, or whipping, or some other physical practice.

Rather, Paul is referring to his spiritual nature and the body of sin, the corruption of his nature and the necessity of putting off the old man with his deeds and putting on our Lord Jesus Christ.

The idea here is of one subduing his evil concupiscence, making no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.

Just as the athlete brings his opponent to the ground and subdues him, so we must do the same with our fleshly lusts, and all sin.

It is Satan, the devil, the powers of darkness that subvert our nature, and with whom we wrestle in the spiritual arena.

So often, we picture Satan as something nebulous when, in reality, he is very real. Because he is a spiritual being, we tend to discount his existence and may even question his influence within the world and upon each of us.

There is no greater witness to Satan's existence than our Lord Himself, and certainly St. Paul has provided adequate testimony to that fact.

Knowing our enemy is part of the preparation to do battle; knowing that he is deceptive and plays upon our human frailty.

Knowing ourselves is another part of the preparation; understanding our own individual weaknesses, our fears, and our yearnings.

We may be assured that Satan knows these things about us.

However, as Christians, properly prepared, we can take on and, in the end, defeat the enemy.

So how do we prepare for battle and defeat this insidious enemy?

The first step is accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour.

The second is putting on the garment of Love.

And the third is arming ourselves with the Gospel, the Word of God.

Thus, we are ready for the competition, more than a competition, for it is a battle for our souls, and the goal that we attain to is eternal life. We are sustained by the Sacraments of the Church, cleansed, fed, and refreshed. And we are not alone in this competition, this battle for a heavenly crown; we are joined by all the saints, and we find strength and comfort within our Family in Christ.

You might be thinking, this is all well and good but what is the reality, the implications here and now? How does all this translate? What does it mean to me?

The reality is that we are all mortal, which implies that at some point our bodies will die, and our spirits or souls will be released from our bodies.

What happens then is up to us now. We make decisions through all that we do, decisions that translate into actions, and that will determine our final outcome.

If we deny God; if we deny Jesus Christ; if we refuse God's Grace; then we are setting a course that will lead to a lasting separation from God. Satan will have won, and we will have lost. Our hell will be eternal darkness.

If we embrace God, accept Jesus Christ, and accept God's Grace freely given, then we are setting a course that will lead to eternal life with God. Satan will have lost, and we will have won. Our heaven, our crown, will be everlasting light in the presence of God.

Truly, it is almost that simple. Because God so loves us, he wants us to be united with Him in all eternity. That is why He sent His Son into the world: to make it possible for this to happen, knowing our human frailty.

When Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross, our sins were nailed there with Him. When he was raised up on the cross, He took us up with Him. When He died on the cross, our sins died with Him, we died with Him: and when He was raised from the dead, so were we, with the hope of life eternal.

We, who have been baptized, have been washed in His Blood; so cleansed, we have been made heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven by adoption, as adopted Children of God.

We have been made members of His Body, the Church, where we are fed and spiritually nourished with a heavenly banquet, His Body and Blood.

Through the Church we find comfort, indeed, we find the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whose sphere of operation is within the Church.

Through the Church, we are joined together as one family in Christ.

It is now, in the reality of today, that we begin the journey that leads us to the commemoration of that moment in history, that moment in time, when our Lord obeyed the will of His Father and gave Himself up to death on the Cross, knowing the pain that was to come and that fearful moment of separation from the Father.

For us today, this journey of commitment, or of recommitment, in comparison to our Lord's journey, is easy, even when we submit ourselves to various spiritual and physical disciplines, such as abstinence or taking on some purposeful spiritual activity or devotion.

There are many opportunities for each of us during this long penitential season of Pre-Lent and Lent, to become the person we ought to be in the sight of God. One place to begin is right here at God's Holy Table, his Altar, fed and nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ.

Indeed, as we make that journey with our Lord to the Cross, even with the devil lurking around every corner, we can find confidence in those words of Jesus: "Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you."

We can find confidence in that He defeated Satan, making it possible for us to do likewise, and attain the heavenly Crown.

Though we are entering a somber period in the Life of the Church, it is not altogether so dire. It is an opportunity to refocus, rededicate, and to reflect on that great sacrifice made out of love for us; an opportunity to take a long look at our busy lives and explore how we can make room for God amidst the business of this world.

Consider: we each have been given the potential to be children of God: what have we done to develop that potential?

During this season of the Church, as we mark the fateful moments in our Lord's Life on His way to the Cross, let us not overlook the joy of His continued presence, both in His Body, the Church, and in our lives; His unfailing love; and the strength He gives us through His Body and Blood to gain the victory over Satan and death, and to attain the Crown of Eternal Life.