

Sexagesima

I take as my text today from St. Luke's Gospel:

And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.

“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.”

The violet hangings and vestments affirm that we are well into the pre-Lenten Season, and that we should be using this period in preparation that we may keep a faithful Lent with fasting and prayer. By that, I mean that, surely, we are giving serious consideration as to how we can make the most out of Lent with spiritual and physical disciplines that complement each other.

I would dare say that most of us are looking forward to Lent with a certain dread, along with a sense of dreariness, perhaps because of the great emphasis on austerity, with fasting and meditation focused on penitence, all seemingly punctuated by the lack of flowers on the Altar.

As they say, Lent is just around the corner, fast approaching, and with it comes a needed period for reflection, a time for introspection and contemplation. Not that we can't be introspective and contemplative any other time.

Spiritual introspection and contemplation should be a regular part of our lives; however, if there were not a Lenten Season, would we individually set aside such an extensive period of time to reflect on our past lives; who we are in the present; and what we will become in the future? Would we be so bold on our own to observe with any special discipline these six weeks that approximate the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness?

Perhaps, that is why orthodox Christianity sets this time aside for us as a special preparatory period, Lent as a period that helps us to focus our lives spiritually through discipline for that climactic event in the salvation of mankind, which we celebrate on Easter Sunday.

For the moment, with Pre-Lent, we are in a transitional time, going from Christmastide, a Season of Expectation and Joy, to Lent, a season of solemnity and deprecation.

We have experienced the joy of the Nativity when God entered into our world as a child, taking on our very human nature in the form of Jesus Christ.

We have celebrated the Epiphany where Christ is revealed to the world as the Messiah.

We have witnessed His presentation in the Temple as a completion of that Epiphany celebration, Jesus presented to the world through the witness of Simeon and Anna. Both had been waiting in anticipation of the coming of the Messiah.

Simeon had been promised that he would live to see the day of the Messiah. Anna, a prophetess and widow, had waited day and night in fasting and prayer in the Temple for the day when she would see the Messiah.

Simeon said it well as he addressed the Virgin Mary:

Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (yea, a sword shall pierce thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts shall be revealed.

The world was presented with the Love of God in that moment, a Love which it would reject, though God would not reject the world, his Creation.

Through the life, ministry, and death of Jesus the Messiah, God would plant the Seed of Truth, the Word of God, so that it might land on fertile soil and bear fruit.

We are that soil, we who hear the Word of God and act upon it, taking it into our hearts, where it can grow and bear fruit in our lives.

The Parable of the Sower and the Seed from St. Luke's Gospel for today illustrates this perfectly, as our Lord takes a snippet from nature and uses it to convey a spiritual truth

There is a certain harmony between things spiritual and things material, and in parables we can see material objects used to express spiritual truths, revealing that nature is more than it seems.

In this parable, our Lord simply took what He saw, as He looked about Him, a man sowing seed, and expressed it in the form of a parable, to illustrate the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

Central to the parable is the fate of the seed, not of the sower. Indeed, we might think of the sower as our Lord Jesus Christ, and from Him, extending to Christian preachers and teachers, as well.

But it is the seed standing for "Christian Truth" that figures prominently in the parable, beautifully illustrating how the "Christian Truth" or "Word of God" is received by those who hear it.

We've probably heard the exposition of this parable many times:

The sower was casting his seed about the prepared ground, with some going astray and falling along the pathway, in the rocks, and among the thorns and weeds.

The seed falling on the wayside, the hard beaten path across the field, was trodden down and eaten by birds, representing those caught up in worldly affairs, business or social calls; those whose minds are so pre-occupied with other concerns that the Word is lost in hearts already filled with the worldly;

There is the seed falling upon the rocky places where the soil is thin and insufficient to support a root system, where it sprouts quickly, but just as quickly withers away, representing those who are quickly and readily susceptible to religious influences, but, despite their excitement and enthusiasm, soon lose interest, tire and fade from the scene, the seed unable to take root;

Some seed falls among the thorns, where it is choked up and dies, representing those who, while capable of developing true spirituality, are torn between God and the world;

Finally, the seed that falls on good ground, representing Christians who are not only receptive to the "Word of God," but who also respond by developing their spirituality to the fullest extent of their capability.

Now, as we approach Lent, we have several good questions to contemplate and a whole season in which to discover the answers: where do we fit into this parable? What kind of soil are we? What is the fate of the seed that falls on us?

When we hear the Word of God, do we take it into our hearts and let it grow within us to bring forth fruit?

Even now, as we are coming into a time of prayerful introspection, a season in which our spiritual focus turns inward, we should prepare our soil, our hearts and souls, for the Seed of Truth, the Word of God, that it might grow and bear fruit.

This present world is not without its own wilderness where God is not welcome; but we have a ready refuge, the Church where we may find comfort and hope; where we may find love and compassion; where God is ever present through the Holy Spirit.

In this refuge, we may be strengthened and nourished as we are fed with the Bread of Heaven; inspired by Holy Scripture; and comforted through prayer and meditation.

The Church is our safe haven in this world, and in our catholic tradition, the physical building itself, notwithstanding the liturgical worship, is a place that awakens our senses to the presence of God in his House.

We are not without our weaknesses, which are tested daily in our journey through life, but as our Lord was strengthened by the Holy Spirit in the wilderness, so will the Holy Spirit strengthen us and reveal to us the way to overcome our weaknesses.

In his 2nd Letter to the Corinthians, the lesson for Morning Prayer, St. Paul talked of his weaknesses and the adversities he suffered, and he offered this insight:

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee:
for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

St. Paul makes clear not that our weaknesses will be taken from us but that through prayer and God's Grace, we may conquer them.

Though we are weak, we are not without the capability to tend our soil to make it fit for the Seed of Truth, so that as God sows his Word in us, we may be prepared and receptive. That is where spiritual and physical discipline, working together in our lives — prayer, meditation, and self-denial with a purpose — come into play, clearing the weeds and rocks, tilling and making us fertile ground.

Indeed, our Faith, Hope, and Love through God's Grace will enable us to become fertile soil for the Seed of Truth, that we may bear good fruit and attain to eternal life.