

Trinity 15

I take as my text from today's Epistle passage:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.

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

Over the last eight years, you have probably heard me ask one certain question a number of times:

What's makes us a Christian? Is it simply saying “I'm a Christian”?

What is it, then, that makes us a Christian, indeed, what sets Christians apart from the world?

For the Jew, it was circumcision and keeping of the Law that set them apart, in essence bringing them under the Covenant and identifying them as Jews.

St. Paul's argument, in today's Epistle passage from his letter to the Galatians, is that this, circumcision and keeping the law, was the outward sign, and that there was more. If the heart were sinful, then circumcision would be of no avail. In other words, a circumcised body and a sinful heart would be at odds.

Thus, Paul turns our focus to the internal rather than the external. He focuses on the condition of the heart rather than the circumcision of the body.

But, again, what makes us a Christian?

Truly, we must accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. But that alone does not make us a Christian.

The indelible mark that makes us a Christian is Baptism: Baptism in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. It is an act of dying to sin through the water of Baptism and being reborn unto Christ; we become a new person and enter into a new relationship with God and the world as God's adopted children and inheritors of His Kingdom.

But there is more.

Becoming this new person also brings with it a certain responsibility for our own salvation. Salvation is not something that we can earn. Nor is it something we obtain simply by submitting to Baptism. It requires action on our part. Being a Christian is not passive; it is in every sense active.

For example: God freely gives His Grace; but it is up to us to accept it. God feeds us, sustains us with the Bread of Heaven in the Holy Eucharist; but it is up to us to go to the Altar and receive it. God holds open the door to Heaven; but it is up to us to go through it.

Now, how does this relate to what St. Paul is saying in his letter to the Galatians?

We must understand that St. Paul was being challenged at every turn on two fundamental aspects of his ministry: first, his claim to be an Apostle and second, his claim that salvation through Jesus Christ had been extended to the gentiles.

Though finally accepted as an Apostle because of his personal encounter with our Lord on the road to Damascus, it remained a point of contention with many in the early Church because Paul had not actually been with Jesus during His ministry, nor had he been a witness to the Resurrection.

But the real bone of contention with certain of the Jewish-Christians was Paul's work to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The thinking of some in the early Church was that salvation was for the Jews alone; that Christ came to bring salvation to the Jews and no one else; that gentiles were outside the sphere of Grace. These Jewish-Christians were called "Judaizers."

Paul was writing this letter to the Church in Galatia in response to the Jewish-Christian teachers and preachers who were attempting to undo Paul's work by insisting that the gentile converts to Christianity must be circumcised and keep the Law. They must be good Jews in order to be Christians.

There are two notable points in their argument: one secular and the other religious.

First, by being Jews, the Christian converts would be protected from persecution by the Romans, as Rome recognized and allowed the Jews to practice their religion. These Christian converts would also be afforded some protection from Jews themselves, as they would bear the mark of a Jew through circumcision.

Second, by submitting to circumcision and by keeping all the rules of the Law they would earn God's approval, and thus be entitled to salvation.

But, it must be noted too that these Jewish-Christians themselves did not keep all the Law, that is the Mosaic Law and all the minutia that had been attached to it. Keeping all the Law was impossible, so, in essence, the Gentile converts would be reduced to legalistic slavery.

All of this flew in the face of Paul's Gospel, his contention that only through faith in Jesus Christ, and in what He wrought on the Cross could a person be saved. There is no entitlement to salvation; it is not something that we earn. It is not a reward given to us just for keeping the Law, or just for being baptized.

Christ had fulfilled the Law and had freed mankind from its bondage. But this did not mean that the Law itself was void, or no longer of any worth, for the Law, the Ten Commandments as given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, is an essential part of our journey to Grace. It serves to tell us what sin is, and, as the sinful creatures that we are, we can see from the Law that we cannot of ourselves keep it. We see in the Law our own weaknesses as sinners.

Having endowed us with freewill, the ability to choose between right and wrong, God went on to give us the Ten Commandments to make known to us His law of right and wrong. These Commandments contain the Moral Law representing our duty towards God, and our duty towards our neighbor.

It is in the Ten Commandments that we find the rule of life that serves to keep us on the right path, and to keep us from straying into forbidden territory. And in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave the Law a fuller and wider meaning that we Christians have come to accept as the Law of Love.

Paul did not reject the Law. He rejected the premise that keeping the Law was itself a guarantee of salvation. His focus was on faith and a newness of life that could not be brought about by circumcision but only by the power of Almighty God.

Through Christ's Death on the Cross and His Resurrection, we have become "new creatures."

When we are baptized, we die unto sin and rise up to a new life in Jesus Christ. Through God's Grace, a deep and radical change takes place: our former prejudices, habits, attachments pass away; our love of sin, of the world pass away; pride and vanity give way to humility.

Our purpose in life; the feelings in our heart; all become new.

As a new creature we can now focus on the means of our salvation: faith in Jesus Christ, and faith in what His Death on the Cross has accomplished for us.

With this faith and strengthened by God's Grace freely given, we can find peace and mercy and everlasting life.

Yet, we must not forget that to be a Christian requires action on our part. It is not a passive religious experience whereby we await God to act. He has already acted; He has provided all the means of salvation.

Now, it is our turn to use the free will with which He has endowed us, created in His Image, and to accept Him into our hearts. Yes, into our hearts, for it is the seat of love within us and God, by His Own Nature, is Love.

That is the circumcision of the heart that Paul speaks about. It is not the outward circumcision but the inward change when we turn our hearts toward God.

This is not new with Paul. We see it in the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy:

And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.

While physical circumcision was the outward sign of God's covenant with Israel, circumcision of the heart was the inward sign. Indeed, how much this resembles the concept of a sacrament: the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

From our hearts, God stretches out through the Holy Spirit to encompass our minds, our souls, indeed, to permeate our very being.

Thus permeated by the Holy Spirit, we are compelled to act if we indeed have that lively faith that brings us into communion with our Heavenly Father.

It is the circumcision of the heart, not of the flesh, that brings us under the Law of Love. And it is baptism that gives us the indelible mark of a Christian.

Then, as Christians actively engaged in our own salvation, we have the potential to be, truly, instruments of His Peace that passes all understanding as we grow in the knowledge and love of God.