

Trinity 5

I take as my text today from St. Peter's First General Epistle:

BE ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing....

“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.”

Of the General Epistles, the First Epistle of St. Peter is probably one of the best known and loved, perhaps even one of the most read.

As we have mentioned before, there has been, in recent times, some disagreement as to the authenticity of authorship of this Epistle; however, there is still consensus among most Biblical commentators that St. Peter truly is the source of the Epistle. Many scholars concede that the excellent Greek in which it was written can be attributed to Silvanus, who had been a colleague of both St. Peter and St. Paul. It is thought that Silvanus took Peter's notes and translated them, adding his own style, with Peter adding the final personal paragraph to the letter.

Written near the time of his death around the year 67, this First Epistle of St. Peter appears to be directed to Gentile Christians in the northwest parts of Asia Minor. Most likely, Silvanus carried the completed letter to its intended recipients, landing first at Sinop on the Black Sea coast of Turkey. From there he would have taken a circular route, traveling through Bithynia, south to Galatia and Cappadocia, then west before returning to Sinop.

Sinop is, perhaps, memorable for its inclusion in Homer's *Odyssey*, being the home of *Sinopia* and *Cyclops*, a peninsula jutting out into the Black Sea on the Turkish Black Sea Coast. It stands about 600 feet high giving a magnificent 360 degree view of the surrounds land and sea.

The occasion for Peter writing this letter was to strengthen the men and women who would be facing the threat of persecution. Indeed, persecution had begun in Rome following the burning of the city in July of 64, allegedly at the hands of Nero.

Nero sought to deflect the blame from himself and found a suitable scapegoat in the Christians, who he tortured unmercifully, even using them as human torches to light his gardens at night.

Peter knew that, while Christians elsewhere in the world had not felt the threat of persecution, it was coming. The threat was spreading out from Rome to all the provinces of the Empire. Peter wanted to give them encouragement in the face of the horrendous danger that lay ahead for them.

In the passage we read today, Peter is laying out the marks of a Christian Life, six sustaining qualities, which would unite them and preserve them in a threatening world.

These six qualities are: unity, sympathy, brotherly love, compassion, humility, and forgiveness. They are not unique to Peter, as they are found throughout the Epistles of Paul, as well as in the Gospels themselves.

Indeed, the first quality is unity, a theme that runs through the New Testament. There is unity in the Godhead; there is unity in the Body of Christ, the Church; and we are joined together in that unity as members of this Body of Christ. In Christ we are united as one; there are no walls separating us, no barriers.

There is one Gospel uniting us all. There can be no divisions in the Church if it is to stand as a Christian Body.

It is this unity, this binding together of Jew and Gentile into the Body of Christ, that provides strength in the face of persecution and the uncertainty of a threatening world.

Even as today the Body of Christ is One, men have created divisions, denominations, factions in the Church on earth, and by embracing their own self-importance, instead of humility, love, and obedience, they have created differing doctrines through their imperfect understanding of the Gospel once delivered.

Christians, wherever they are, always identify with each other, in that when one suffers, we all suffer; when one rejoices, we all rejoice. Peter refers to this as “having compassion one of another.” The word most closely associated is “sympathy,” the second quality Peter lists. By embracing sympathy, we put aside self, for clearly sympathy and selfishness can not coexist. The Greek word that is used is not used elsewhere in the New Testament, and describes the state of mind that exists when we enter into the feelings of others, taking them on as if they were our own feelings. Thus, sympathy is a heart-centered Christian quality.

Another quality that marks us as Christians is “brotherly love.” We find the basis for this in the words of our Lord: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” Jesus goes on to say that by this love for one another we will be identified as being *His*.

John, especially, emphasizes the importance of brotherly love, of Christian Love. In the 3rd chapter of his First Epistle, John says:

We know that we have passed from death unto life,
because we love the brethren. He that loveth not *his*
brother abideth in death.

Simply stated, love of God and love of others are inseparable marks of Christianity, and the true test of a Christian. Whether a church or an individual, their Christian reality is the bond of love: love of God and love of their neighbors.

If we are Christians, we will have the mark of compassion. Peter calls it “pity.” In a materialistic world, a world caught up in strife, a world that emphasizes putting self first, individuals can so easily become insensitive to the plight of others, the needs of others, and the dire conditions that affect so many people. Too many find it easier to be satisfied with sentimentalism, a fleeting moment of sorrow that results in no action.

It is this pity, this compassion, that is the very essence of God and is so intensely reflected in Jesus Christ in that He took up the Cross for us to whom this pity, this compassion was directed.

Though we may never be called to such an extreme as our Lord, or so many who have gone before us, nevertheless, we must strive to emulate that divine compassion that marks us as a Christian.

In all that we do, we are totally dependent upon God. We are His creatures and there is nothing we can do without Him. From that, we derive a great sense of humility. Indeed, our standard for comparison *is* God, in Whose Image we are made. As Christians, we also have as our standard, Jesus Christ, whose sinless perfection is the measure by which we are humbled. We can not be perfect here and now, but we will be made perfect in Christ on the day of judgment. Still, our mark as a Christian is our humble striving to be like Christ.

Tied to humility is “to be courteous.” The word Peter uses means essentially to be friendly-minded, or in another translation, to be humble-minded. This leads us to the last of the qualities that mark us as Christians: forgiveness.

Again, whether in the writings of the Gospels, or the Epistles of Paul, forgiveness is an expressed quality, and more than that, it is a necessity. Our forgiveness is dependent on our forgiving. Only when we forgive are we forgiven. The prayer that Jesus gave us through His disciples, the Lord’s Prayer, clearly states: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

This forgiveness, imploring God’s blessings on even our worst enemies, is quite a challenge. To put it into another perspective, what if God forgave us only to the extent and in the spirit that we forgive others?

Peter has set for us six qualities that are the marks of a Christian. None are easy. None can be realized to the least without our first accepting the love, the mercy, the Grace of God. We do not have to beg for it, just accept it, a divine gift.

As we grow in the knowledge and love of God, these Christian marks become more and more visible. They become our protection. No matter what suffering we may have to endure in this world, we who are in Christ, we who have Christ in our hearts, are safe from all assaults on the soul, and have the assurance that when we do pass through the veil, the victory will be ours.

The joy of eternal life begins here and now, when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour; it is a joy that wells up within us and overflows into our daily lives, touching all around us. It is a joy that is sustained and nourished by the very Body and Blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ, And, through the offering of ourselves in this early sacrifice, the Holy Eucharist, we are joined to His Heavenly Offering in the joyful company of all the saints.