

Trinity 7

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

But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.

“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 Collect, Epistle, and Gospel for this Sunday cover a lot of ground. The Collect appears to be centered on love, while the Epistle is focused on sin, and the Gospel recounts the feeding of the multitude.

Of course, my temptation is to focus on the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist, of which the Gospel passage from St. Mark presents a foretaste.

Having done that on a number of occasions, today I am turning to the Epistle and the topic of sin, not from the perspective so much of condemnation as that of hope and promise, as the Collect gives us hope through love and the Gospel feeds us with the promise of an Heavenly Banquet.

Sin, what it is and how it came into the world, has always been a choice topic for preachers, as well as students of theology, philosophy, Biblical Studies, and even psychology.

We have all been well schooled that the origin of sin is found in Adam. Simply stated, Adam, endowed with free will, sinned by choosing to break a direct commandment of God, and through his sin death entered into the world.

Rather than address what sin is and how it came about, let's instead turn to rather pressing questions: what does sin mean to us here and now and what are we going to do about it?

When Paul was writing this letter to the Church in Rome, he was writing to a church at the center of the known world, the headquarters of the Roman Empire. It was a Roman world and an unclean world.

In the context of the times in which Paul was writing, the world under Roman rule knew no limits to moral depravity. Under each succeeding Caesar or emperor, Roman society decayed even further.

As Paul could see and as history has recorded, in the Roman world, there seemed to be no limit to how people would indulge themselves and just how far society had fallen into a state of depravity.

When we look at the world around us today, we can probably see a lot of similarities to the Roman era in which Paul lived and think, as Paul most likely was thinking, is there any limit to the extent people will go for self-gratification?

When Paul looked around at his world, what he saw was a lawlessness that indeed was the law of sin. He saw that sin creates more sin, especially in that the first time a person commits a sin, there may be hesitation and remorse; but, once it has been done, the next time is easier. And so it continues, each sinful act becomes easier and easier; it loses fearsomeness and, to maintain the thrill, it becomes necessary to experience more and more of this self-gratification, this self-indulgence, until, finally the only reward of sin is death, it's pay.

Indeed, Paul, in talking of the reward of sin, uses the Greek for a soldier's pay, what he earned, what was due him and what could not be taken away.

When we sin, and sin without remorse and are unrepentant; when we turn our backs to Christ, we receive the Devil's pay, the pay of death, eternal separation from the presence of God.

While things may look rather bleak for the world, for the Christian it's a completely different story.

When we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour and are baptized into His Death, we are raised up to a new life, a different life, the life of righteousness.

We begin a new path which is the path to sanctification. As Christians, we are on the path to sanctification, having given over our lives to Christ; we are not yet complete. We are not perfect but we seek perfection in Christ; we seek life rather than death. This life that we seek, this our reward for giving our lives over to Christ, cannot be earned, it is a gift, a totally unearned gift.

Paul, in his play on words, draws from the wages of a Roman soldier where "pay" and "gift" reflects two ways a soldier may be rewarded: first, his pay earned by his performance of duty in the hire of the emperor, and second, his gift, something totally unearned, unexpected, given as a token by the emperor on special occasions.

The relationship Paul draws is that at the end of the day, the soldier got the pay he expected just as at the end of the day, the pay, the wages for sin is death.

Indeed, before Jesus Christ, we were the servants of sin. There was no hope: the only end was death.

But, with Jesus Christ, that all changed. We could be freed from the servitude of sin. We could be set apart from the world of lawlessness. We could see life at the end of the road, not death and darkness.

This life is a gift, a reward that we can never earn. All we have to do is accept it. It is not the wages expected, it is the Gift of God.

While the fruit of sin is more sin, the fruit of serving God is holiness; it is a fruit of the Spirit; and the end is everlasting life.

When we read this passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans, the sixth chapter, verses 19 through 23, we find the hope and beauty in Christ that eluded us in our former state in the world of sin and lawlessness.

Just as the Hebrews of the Old Covenant were separated from the world as the Chosen People of God, so, we Christians are separated from the world as God's Chosen, adopted children through the New Covenant of baptism, having accepted God's Grace freely given.

This does not mean we will lead a life free from adversity or that we will be free from the temptations of the world. What it does mean is that in Christ we will find the strength, the courage, the Grace to endure the world around us and to keep us on the path to holiness and righteousness.

In that Christ established His Body, the Church, as the means to salvation, it is moreover a safe haven and a source of nourishment, a retreat from the world, so to speak. We find within it the helps that we need to survive on our journey to Sanctification, the Sacraments, importantly, the Heavenly Banquet of our Lord's Body and Blood.

We enter through the door of baptism and are sustained by the Holy Spirit through this Holy Communion in the form of bread and wine.

When our journey through this earthly life is ended, the veil is parted for us to enter into life everlasting.

Then, we receive the totally unearned gift of eternal life.