

Trinity 9

I take as my text from St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians:

Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

“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.”

In recent sermons, we have talked about sin; of course, the precursor of sin is temptation. Our course has been to look at sin or temptation, first from St. Paul's perspective in the context of his time, then to bring it forward into the context and perspective of our time.

In today's passage from St. Paul, we get a glimpse of what happened to the Hebrews when they gave in to temptation, during the period of the Exodus, and fell into sin.

As St. Paul graphically notes, retribution was not only swift but also severe.

In those days, the Hebrews were a tempestuous people and quite a handful for Moses as he led them out of their long bondage in Egypt through the Wilderness to the Promised Land.

Now, of course, temptation is a favorite subject of clerics, whether in written expositions, or expounded upon from the pulpit.

But, there is something more underlying this Epistle passage from St. Paul: a presumption, more to the point, a presumption of individual salvation; not the aspiration to salvation but the presumption.

For instance, in our modern era, how many times have you heard the question: are you saved? Have you ever heard someone respond with a “no”?; even with hesitation, the response is never “no”; maybe a “halting” yes; but never an absolute “no”.

There is an almost innate presumption that one is saved; but saved from what or for what?

The problem with the question — are you saved — is that it means different things to those of different religious backgrounds, and there is often a misconception of the whole process of salvation.

What would your response be if I asked *you*: have you been saved?

Probably, your response might be: what do you mean by “saved”?

And that’s a good question!

Perhaps, what we should be asking is: what do you believe? Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Do you accept Him as your Lord and Saviour?

If we can answer in the affirmative, then we are, indeed, on our way to being saved, we are on the right path to salvation.

In light of the Epistle passage we read today from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Church at Corinth, we find salvation, being saved, in a context that, while being specific to the times then, has parallels to the present.

Actually, this question of being saved is not a later phenomenon developing from the zeal of modern evangelism; this same thought was circulating among Paul’s converts.

The converts at Corinth believed they were saved; they were confident that they were saved; indeed, over-confident, as Paul discovered.

Their confidence in their own salvation led them to believe that, because they were saved, they could continue some of their old habits without consequence.

Their confidence, and subsequent backsliding, was more than a misunderstanding of what it meant to be a Christian. It was in a sense a perversion of Christian discipline.

From their point-of-view, had they not been baptized and received the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist? Didn't this in itself cement their salvation? Wasn't God going to forgive them anyway?

It was obvious to Paul that the Corinthians were seeking an easy way to salvation. But, he knew that the Christian must discipline himself in order to realize the goal of eternal life in Christ. This discipline was an integral part of the process — taking individual, personal responsibility for one's own salvation.

In reading this particular passage of St. Paul's Epistle, it appears the issue developed from, and revolved around, eating the meat that had been sacrificed to the various heathen gods. The Corinthians in question reasoned that they had not participated in the sacrifice itself, but simply enjoyed what had been sacrificed in fellowship with their heathen friends.

The Corinthians thought that since they were baptized in Christ, and participated in eating the Body and drinking the Blood of Christ in the Eucharistic Feast, then eating the meat offered in sacrifice to idols was of no consequence: they were protected by having Christ dwelling within them.

Thus, St. Paul is prompted to issue a warning to the Corinthians against being over-confident, even presumptuous, in their salvation, and cites examples from the history of the Children of Israel to make his point.

He reminds them that the Children of Israel, although a privileged people, frequently failed by taking their privilege for granted, by being over-confident in their security as God's Chosen People.

Paul points out to the Corinthians the lessons of the Hebrews.

Despite their privileged status, the Children of Israel, from time-to-time, were severely punished for their misdeeds. He notes that thousands perished for committing fornication with the Midianites and Moabites. Paul points out that many were destroyed by serpents when they participated in a grumbling revolt led by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram.

What Paul is getting at is not just having confidence in one's faith but something much more. Indeed, he is cutting to the core of the issue at hand: complacency.

Complacency in society is not a foreign concept, as we can witness today in our nation whether from individuals, or institutions (secular and non-secular), even government.

In western society, in particular, complacency has permeated the religious lives of many claiming to be Christians, including the infamous Christian right.

More specifically, at issue is complacency that comes from a false feeling of security, taking God for granted, or, as some may prefer to describe it, over-confidence. Whether over-confidence, or just complacency, it is still an abuse of the privileged status of being a Christian, and is, in effect, a weakness, a moral weakness resulting from lack of discipline.

This concept of complacency amongst Christians of all denominations strikes at the heart of a basic requirement of each Christian: discipline.

If — if we are not disciplined in our worship of God, then, do we not fall under the concept of complacency?

When it comes to our obligations and responsibilities as Christians, it matters not of what political persuasion we may be; it matters that we follow the basic precepts of Christianity and the doctrines of Christian Faith

When we fail to meet our very basic obligation to worship God — not just when we want to but in a disciplined manner — then we fall into the category of “complacency”.

To some degree, we each succumb to complacency, and not all to the same degree; but, in truth, we *are* human.

In addressing this issue, though, Paul singles out a number of temptations that Christians face. Each can easily be put into a modern day context.

Paul begins with the temptation to idolatry.

Granted, today there is little opportunity to worship idols as in the time of the early Christians but there is an equivalent: worshipping the material, even putting the works of our own hands above God, by failing to acknowledge from whom the talent, the skills, the wisdom, and all our abilities as a human being come.

Perhaps, the worst idolatry today, especially in the exponential expansion of knowledge, particularly in science, is the refusal to recognize that God is greater than we are; that he, not we, is the source of all knowledge, and to whom we owe our very existence.

Second, there is the temptation to fornication, not just in the Biblical sense. In essence, it is the temptation to give in to the lower self, giving in to impurity, as opposed to seeking out and loving purity; and, most especially, compromising our integrity, our ethics, even our sense of morality, for gain.

Third, there is the temptation to try God.

It may well manifest itself as taking God's mercy too much for granted. It's the idea that whatever we do, it'll be all right because God will always forgive us; kind of like a child pushing to the limits in expectation that the parent will be forgiving, and make it all right again. But, of course, aren't we all children: adopted children of God?

And, finally, the temptation to grumble, or to go through life whining about everything; though surrounded by the beauty of all God's creation, seeing only the rain, the dark clouds, the inconveniences.

It is against these temptations that St. Paul says we need to be vigilant, as in:

Let him who thinks he stands secure take heed lest he fall.

Though we may be tempted, as most certainly we will, there is a safety net in our faith and vigilance. St. Paul is very positive about this. He states:

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

Temptation is a part of life. We may think of it as a test but the word Paul uses for "test" in Greek means more than that; not just a "test" but something designed to make us stronger when we emerge from it.

And there is no temptation that is unique. When we are tempted, we go through something that others have gone through as well, the storm that others have weathered, that through the grace of God they have endured and conquered.

Moreover, when surrounded by temptation, God will always provide a way of escape, a way out, a way to safety, and the escape God provides is not a retreat, or a surrender, but the way of conquest. Always, it is through the power of God's grace that we are able to conquer temptation, and rest secure in His eternal Love.

Again, we may ask: Can we be secure in our faith? Can we be confident in our salvation?

And, of course, that oft asked question: are you saved?

Are we presumptuous in our answer or are we, more to the point as Christians, confident in our faith in Jesus Christ, a faith tempered with humility?

As Christians, we may be confident knowing through Holy Scripture that God has revealed his desire that all his creation be saved, and for that purpose, he sent his only Son into the world.

Are you saved? Am I saved? That is God's desire, and what he has purposed in Creation, to the extent that we accept the gift he has given us in his Son Jesus Christ: adoption as his children, and joint heirs with Christ in the Kingdom of Heaven.

As baptized Christians, having accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, and striving diligently to live our faith in Him; by emulating the Life of our Lord; by following His commandment to love God and to love our neighbor; and by having accepted the gift of God's Grace and his Love; we may be at peace in the blessed hope of eternal life.