

Sexagesima Sunday (12 February 2023)

“Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I. Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more”;

+In the Name...

“Oh Lord, it’s hard to be humble, when you’re perfect in every way...” So goes the old song by Mac Davis, probably unknown by the folks younger than me, and forgotten, or at least wished it was forgotten, by those older than me! But as egotistical as those words sound, did not you feel a little uncomfortable with St. Paul going on and on in this morning’s Epistle about how wonderful he is? You might have thought at first, “No, surely he is not being so egotistical, and even if he is, why would we hear it as we are trying to prepare for Lent, a

time devoid of arrogance and self-centeredness. Paul, whom the Church now teaches is St. Paul, meaning the Church is confident of his place with God Our Father in Heaven. One would expect this most famous of all saints, with the exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to give us an example of the holy life, a way by which we can prepare ourselves for the long violet season of prayer and penitence. Instead, it seems to be a “look at me, look at me” bragging session.

In order to make sense of this apparent lapse in St. Paul’s otherwise straight and narrow personality, we must look at a little background. Paul was always about doing the right thing. He was devoted to the Jewish cause without straying from it until the event on the road to Damascus when he met the Lord. After a little time spent to help him make sense of it all, Paul

became just as intense, but then for the cause of Christ. The Corinthians were gentiles, and so Paul was the first missionary to visit them, to evangelize them. After he continued on his missionary journeys, the Corinthians were visited by Jewish-Christian missionaries. They claimed that they were superior to Paul and the gentile Christians because they strictly adhered to the Jewish law. They sought to undermine Paul's teaching that when it came to life in Christ, there was no difference between Jew and gentile. With an utter lack of loyalty to the one who brought them the Good News, the Corinthians began to follow their new visitors. When Paul found out he was gob smacked! This second letter is his response to the Corinthians, and we get a portion of his disbelief this morning. "Look at what I have done," Paul tells the Corinthians, in order to bring you the good

news! “I have been stoned (not in the Portland sense), I have suffered shipwreck, I have been unclothed and unfed, and you get distracted by the first shiny object to flutter into your line of vision!” Paul does not mean this so much as “Aren’t I wonderful?” but, (if you will allow me another musical example), Golde telling Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof, “For 25 years I cooked for you, I cleaned for you, I milked the cow; if you don’t think I love you, I cannot help you!”

Paul likely would have not wanted this portion of his letter to make it into the Canon of Scripture, but he did not get a say in the matter. For us, however, it is a good example of a person being totally head-over-heals in love with Christ, and what a person can accomplish when in such a state. How many of these trials have we had to experience in order to preach the Gospel?

Or in order to make it to church once a week? Or even just to live our daily lives? It puts things in perspective a little bit, doesn't it?

This week the Church celebrates the feast of St. Sigfried of Sweden. The moniker "of Sweden" is a bit misleading because St. Sigfried not only hailed from England, he spent most of his life there. He was the Archdeacon of York, but King Olaf of Sweden wrote to King Ethelred of England requesting help in converting his kingdom. St. Anskar was the original "apostle of Sweden", although he was born in what is now France. He worked tirelessly converting the people of Sweden, but within 100 years the Church in Sweden had fallen on hard times. When King Ethelred called a Synod of the clergy to deal with the request, no one wanted to volunteer. It seems even monks of the

rainy Northern British climate found staying there more appealing than travelling to the even farther North, dark, wooded lands of Sweden. Almost in disgust, Sigfried, well past the prime of his life, volunteered to go to Sweden. When he arrived, he offered Mass for the King's men who came to meet him because the king was away travelling at the time. When the king returned, one of his earls reported how when Sigfried celebrated mass, they could see the Infant Jesus above his head, smiling, with his hands extended. The King, who oddly had not been baptized, despite professing to be a believing Christian, sought baptism immediately, as did many others who saw the miracle or heard first-hand accounts of it. And while I hope you do not expect such a miracle in a few minutes when I celebrate

Mass, it shows us that God can use us in places where we least expect it.

Paul had to travel not just to Corinth, but all across the Mediterranean world. Anskar and Sigfried not only had to travel, but had to learn the languages of other peoples. We are merely called to evangelize in the city where we live, or a neighboring city if we drive from farther away. And while it may seem that the average Portlander is speaking a foreign language, it is more similar than French is to Swedish!

And what did Sigfried hope to get out of it? He could have returned to England and lived out his days happily in his monastery and never heard of Sweden again. But he took the Great Commission seriously, to baptize all people in the Name of the Trinity. The only one reason we should do that is to spread

the love of Christ. Yes, a full church with full coffers would be great, but that is not an end in and of itself. Let us follow St. Sigfried, who followed St. Anskar before him, who followed St. Paul before him. We won't get a country ballad or a song in a famous musical written about us, and surely our trials will not get added to Holy Scripture. But our faith will be made known unto God, and His opinion is the only one that really counts anyway.

+In the Name...