

Lent III (12 March 2023)

“BE ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour. But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints”;

+In the Name...

As I get older, I find myself forgetting things more frequently than I used to. From talking to my parents and others who are older than I am, I gather this is not unusual. In a similar vein are things that seem so familiar, I could swear it was not the first time reading, hearing, or doing something. Déjà vu, it is sometimes called. Well, in case you are feeling like we heard this same epistle last Sunday, we did not, but we heard one with some strikingly similar themes: last week’s epistle was taken from St. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, while this week’s is taken from the

same author's letter to the Ephesians. Before you start thinking that either St. Paul needs to expand his subject matter (or at least those who compiled the Sunday readings for the Prayer Book need to), we should look at the purpose of Lent, and maybe even our present-day society.

Remember that while Lent is the time for all of us to fast, pray and give alms as we prepare for Easter, it has also been one of the traditional times for converts to prepare to enter the Church. Their instruction would be taking place at this time so that they could be baptized at the Easter Vigil.

As you know, the first Christians were Jews (as was Our Lord Jesus), and so those religious beliefs that were important to Jews were frequently important to the early Christians. The three primary vices in the Jewish mind were licentiousness, covetousness, and idolatry. Hence St. Paul instructing the new Christians against fornication and covetousness. And for good measure, he throws in "all uncleanness" just to make sure he has not left out anything important!

Both epistles mention fornication specifically, which is specifically sex outside of marriage, but licentiousness is much broader, including any sexual immorality and even a general lack of restraint or respect for rules.

The broader category under which these sins fall is “lust.” If you have ever used the St. Augustine’s Prayer Book for an examination of conscience, you know it divides up the questions you are asked to consider into seven categories, what are classically described as the Seven Deadly Sins. Lust is among those, and it is another term that often gets limited to less than what it really means. It can certainly mean something very specific physically, but one could lust after something more nebulous like prestige, or completely un-physical, such as power. St. Louis described lust as simply “the inordinate desire of unlawful pleasure.” (Here unlawful means against God’s law, not the civil law. Sadly, there seems to be much less overlap all the time.) The other important word there is “inordinate.” This is not just a fleeting interest in

something that should not pique our interest, but an excessive or disproportionately large one, obsessing over it perhaps.

If today were not a Sunday, we would celebrate the feast of St. Gregory the Great. (Mass is at 12:15 tomorrow afternoon for those of you who might be interested. ;-)) He should be an important saint to all Anglicans as he sent St. Augustine of Canterbury to England to re-evangelize the British Isles after the ancient Celtic Church (established by St. Joseph of Arimathea, according to Holy Tradition) had been forced into exile in the Northern and Eastern extremes of the Kingdom by invading heathens.

I bring him up because he explained that there are three degrees, or steps, on the way to sinning: suggestion, delight, and consent. First the devil suggests something sinful to us. This can be done any number of ways: we might hear or see something, but sometimes a thought or an image will just pop into our minds, seemingly from nowhere. It can be so

random that we might even pause to ask ourselves, “From where did that idea come?” An idea popping into our minds is not sinful. It usually cannot be helped, as we did not cause it to appear there. If the process ends there, no sin has been committed. But we have control over what happens next: the second step is “delight.” This is where we entertain the idea that has landed in our mind: “Hey, wouldn’t it be nice if…” or “I wish I could just this once…” Even if we do not act out what we are daydreaming about, we have sinned because we have hoped that we might do something which we know to be wrong. I am not in the habit of quoting Baptist politicians, but Jimmy Carter once famously said that if a man saw a beautiful woman, it was okay if he looked once but it was a sin if he looked twice. If you think this sounds too severe, remember Our Lord’s words in the Gospel according to St. Matthew: “But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” Finally, there is “consent.” This is what

happens if after careful thought and reflection, we decide to go ahead with whatever sin has been suggested, even though we know it is sinful and therefore against the will of God. This part is important, as a normally-sinful action cannot be a sin unless the person committing the act knows it to be a sin and is choosing to do it anyway. The maxim of American legal jurisprudence, “Ignorance of the law is no excuse” does not apply to Holy Mother Church.

The saints refer to the “custody” of the eyes. This is where they suggest that we take care what we put into our mind by seeing. Even by watching just the news we can be dulled to what is going on in our contemporary world: killing, lying, stealing, neglect, injustice. And I am just talking about actual events, not to mention what we might find in movies, television, song lyrics and video games. It is so tempting to watch a movie that is considered “family friendly” but glorifies activity that we would classify as sinful. Does that not dull our senses at least a little to

what is not acceptable to Almighty God? And to think that this was a challenge 2,000 years ago, when the faithful could not have been bombarded with the sheer volume of distractions that we are today!

St. Paul further exhorts the hearer to have no fellowship, no contact, with the works of darkness. We sinners (remember, soon to be baptized at Easter) were once there, so we should know better than anyone why such comradery should be avoided. We should not even speak about activities, St. Paul tells us. Biblical scholars believe the final verse from today's Epistle is from an ancient baptismal hymn: "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." May we be wide awake for the rest of our Lenten journey, so that we might see the road ahead leading to, and illuminated by, Our Blessed Savior.

+In the Name...