

Trinity VII (23 July 2023)

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

+In the Name...

It has been an odd week. Not as odd as the week when the man dressed in plastic garbage bags interrupted a daily mass wanting to know why I was up at the altar like that because it was not a “Catholic” church, but still odd in its own rite. While I read the lessons for Sunday early in the week, and research and write down notes continually throughout the week, it usually falls to Saturday to put everything together into a presentable sermon.

This week I felt like I started a day behind because Tuesday was my first day in the office. I know I was on vacation, so I am not asking for sympathy, but I tell you so know where the discombobulation began. Then the week was just a string of interesting visitors,

reflecting either the neighborhood or the city, or perhaps both. As is frequently the case, none of them were interested in Christ or the spiritual things the Church has to offer, but the more tangible things.

The climax might have been the innumerable emergency response vehicles that went by my office on 21st Avenue yesterday, but then there were more on Lovejoy. I could not get a good enough view peeping out of my office window, so I went out to the courtyard and through the gate just in time to see the police close the intersection at 21st and Marshall before five policemen with very large rifles came running (not walking fast) south on 21st Avenue. At that point I decided it would be prudent to lock the gate and stay inside. It turned out my car was inaccessible due to its location in the hospital garage, so it is a good thing I was not planning to go anywhere right away.

Several blocks were cordoned off for a time, but then a band started to play over in front of the Indian restaurant. I assume it was coincidental

and not to celebrate the opening of the road, but one never knows. I just stood aghast at how quickly the neighborhood could go from trembling while on lock-down, to party-fun-time!

But is this not similar to what St. Paul describes in his epistle to the Romans that we heard this morning? It is actually a continuation of the epistle from last week, so I hope I am not just repeating what Bp. Mitchell preached then. The fallacy that the Church in Rome had fallen into was that once a person decided to follow Christ, the sin he chooses to commit is no longer of deadly consequence. If this sounds familiar, you might recognize it from the “once saved, always saved” mantra popular in Calvinist and evangelical circles. That is, once you choose to follow Christ and are “saved”, it is not possible for one to lose Heaven and be damned to hell. St. Paul tells the Church in Rome that is not true: when a person decides to be a Christian, he must give himself wholly to following his new master Jesus Christ. He uses the

example of being a servant of sin. Here by “servant” Paul really means a slave. Think of how a physical slave, or one in the ante-bellum definition of the American South lived: a slave could not choose not to do what his master told him to do. He could not wake up one morning and decide he was going to follow a different master, or choose to split his allegiance between two masters. Likewise, we cannot choose to split our devotion between God and sin: the thinking “on Saturday night my god is sin and debauchery but on Sunday morning my God is Jesus Christ” does not work for Christians. Of course, any sin that is chosen over Christ is problematic, not just the decadent and glamorous ones. And each time we choose it, it becomes an easier choice than the time before.

But that word “sin” is going to get us into trouble too. Does our world believe in “sin” anymore? If you watch television commercials it would appear we do: “if you travel on our cruise ship, you will have

such a grand time you will think it's sinful"! Or what if you go to dinner at one of our neighborhood's fine restaurants. "This dessert is so rich it's sinful"! Certainly, one could sin on a cruise ship, and I have no doubt it has occurred. Likewise, one could sin by consuming too much sweets. Indeed, sins are not limited just to things that are always bad, such as those listed in the Ten Commandments, but also include things that are not bad in and of themselves but can become sinful if we over-indulge in them. But then at the same time society does not really like us pointing out sin because that implies there is objective right and a wrong. As Americans we like to have our "pluriform truths", to quote a former Presiding Bishop, whom I shall refrain from naming. Honestly, I think we are more hypocritical than that: I think as a society we say we like multi-truths when our opinion is in the minority, but when our opinion is in the majority then we think everyone should have to follow it!

But the thing about Christianity is that it does not require anyone outside the Church to believe in it in order for us to practice it. Sure, it helps if the society is helping to reinforce Biblical values, whether that is the government, Hollywood, the education system, or even pop culture. We were spoiled in this country for much of our history because society did reinforce our beliefs. Now we have to decide for ourselves that we are going to “yield [y]our members servants to righteousness unto holiness” as St. Paul told us this morning. And St. Paul does not mince words when it comes to the result if we do not follow Our Lord. Death! “Well sure,” you might be thinking, “but we are all going to die.” Yes, but Paul is not talking of just the physical death, but the death of the soul, we might say. Not that a soul can really die, as it is immortal. Our brains have trouble with that concept: forever. Perhaps it is more understandable if we call it “forever and ever”, like in the Lord’s Prayer. The soul tainted by sin

will not die, but an eternity without God will be worse than if the soul did die.

But we can be free from all sin! (Freedom is an ideology that still finds merit with Americans, even if we cannot agree on what freedoms we should have!) But again, Christ and St. Paul are telling us to sweep before our own doors. We need to choose freedom from sin; we need to choose to repent of our sin; yes, we are called to convert the world, but what a better example we will be to the world if we don't just preach at them to change their lives, but say humbly from experience, "Christ changed my life. And nothing in the world could convince me to change it back. He can change your life too."

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