

Sexagesima (4 February 2024)

“YE suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise. For ye suffer, if a man bring you into bondage, if a man devour you, if a man take of you, if a man exalt himself, if a man smite you on the face. I speak as concerning reproach, as though we had been weak.”

+In the Name of...

Is this not the greatest opening line of any piece of Scripture we find in our lectionary? I do not mean St. Paul woke up one morning and thought to himself, “Oh, I have a great opening line for today’s lecture; this one will stop them in their tracks!” Of course, we have no original copies of Scripture. Our Lord did not descend from Heaven with a red-letter Authorized Version in tow. And certainly, the earliest scribes did not include chapter and verse numbers; these were added later to aid in studying and giving organization to the books. And even if the mythical arrival from Heaven of Holy Writ had occurred as I described, this line is neither the beginning of a book nor the beginning of a chapter. In fact, the way most Bibles divide paragraphs, it is not even the first line of one of those, perhaps denoting that St. Paul did not think

this was quite the classic line that I think it is. Yet, the editors of the lectionary of the Book of Common Prayer saw the humor, or at least the appropriateness of starting our epistle with this line: “Suffer fools gladly.”

And how easy it is to sit smugly in our pews (or pulpits) and think to ourselves, “Oh, St. Paul, you don’t know the half of it: I have to deal with so-and-so in my life, the textbook definition of a fool!” I was visiting my parents during this last week, and they enjoy watching re-runs of The Tonight Show when it was hosted by Johnny Carson. I enjoyed comparing which of his guests became household names and which ones disappeared into oblivion. One comedian, whom I had never heard of, was telling jokes at how slow the Department of Motor Vehicles office was when he visited. I laughed, not necessarily because he was particularly funny, but because this is a division of government whose reputation has literally not changed in 40+ years!

Let me give another example with a different twist: I was born and raised in Oregon. When I was little, my mom and my aunt (both brunettes) used to tell “blonde jokes”. There was no end to their enjoyment making fun of the foolish ways of those with light-colored hair. When I went to college, I heard

many of the same jokes, but they were told about people who came from the neighboring state of North Dakota! How telling that the exact same jokes were deemed just as funny when they were told about a group of folks with a certain color of hair as when they were told about people with a certain address! It goes to show that there was nothing particularly “blonde” or North Dakota-esque in those jokes, but that those who found them funny enjoyed pointing out the perceived foolishness of a group of people.

Yet is this what St. Paul is really saying here? That yes, you Christians (you Continuing Anglicans) are right and everyone else is wrong, but you will have to grin and bear it as long as you are on this side of the pearly gates. Well, not exactly... St. Paul would have been the last one to boast about himself or his own accomplishments. Here he is frustrated with the Christians in Corinth because no sooner had he left, then Jewish Christians came there preaching that one had to follow the Jewish law in order to be a Christian, undermining what St. Paul had already taught the Corinthian Church. St. Paul, having persecuted the early Church before his conversion on the road to Damascus, knew the Jewish law as well, if not better, than those preachers who followed

him at Corinth. St. Paul knew only a fool would boast of his accomplishments because they should only be attributed to God's glory and not to the credit of the human performing them.

The commonality in the epistle and the Gospel today is patience. We do not have to interpret the parable in the Gospel according to St. Luke, as it is one of the few that Our Lord explains to the apostles: the seed is the Word of God, and that which falls on the side of the road is indicative of those who hear the Good News but the devil steals it from them before they have a chance to accept it. That which falls on the rocky ground is indicative of those who hear the Word and believe, but because their faith has no roots, they easily fall into temptation. That which fell into thorns is indicative of those who believe, but then chase after the physical pleasures of this life. Lastly the seed which fell on the good ground is indicative of those who hear the Word of God, believe it, and allow it to transform their lives.

There are a couple of important lessons for us here: not everyone who is presented with the Good News is going to happily accept it: this parable is quite clear on that point. Many of us have been in the Church so long we

cannot understand why others are not within Her fold as well: “How foolish do you have to be to think that all of creation is an accident and there is nothing greater than mankind?” we might ask ourselves. But those who have no exposure to the Church are equally flummoxed as to how people can believe that a family took two of every animal on a boat for 40 days and 40 nights, or that a virgin gave birth to a child. It is not stated that a person who starts in one category of seed cannot eventually move to another category of seed. The United Nations estimates that 385,000 babies are born every day in the world, 10,000 of those in the US, according to the Center for Disease Control. There will never be an end to those who need to hear the Word of God!

The lesson for us is that we have to be patient with those who need to hear the word of God. We have to keep offering it to them by doing what the Church does, not to be a thorn in their side but so that they know who we are and that we are available when they come to that point in their lives that they are ready for God.

And remember that Rector whom I have not mentioned in this sermon, but surely this apocryphal story has occurred somewhere in the history of

Anglicanism: every month he patiently attended his parish's vestry meetings, knowing that he was fulfilling the word of God by suffering fools gladly. And every month the members of the Vestry were equally confident that he was helping them to accomplish the same thing.

+In the Name..