

Our Gospel lesson this morning shows us the heart of Christ for man. Humanity was created to be God's special image-bearer. And we know the story, how the serpent, the manifestation of Satan, the accuser, who hated humanity for the fact that it is the image bearer of God, deceived Eve, and then through Eve, Adam. Now were the man and woman innocent in this deception? Was the outcome of this confrontation a forgone conclusion? No. Satan appealed to the ego of humans. Mankind was created as moral agents and had the freedom to obey or disobey God. But Satan knew the pride of humanity and struck at this weakness. "You don't have to be subject to God. You can be God!" The pride of man led to the subjection of the human race to sin, and to the separation of the creation from its Creator.

Yet God would not give up on His image bearers. The pinnacle of His creation would be redeemed. The love of God would pursue the man and the woman and they would learn the sacrifice that divine love was prepared to make. Christ would go all the way to rescue the lost. The love of God as demonstrated in the self-sacrifice of Christ continues to pursue lost humanity into all the world so that some might be found. And when the lost sheep is found, there is rejoicing in heaven. When the coin is returned to the wallet, there is rejoicing in heaven. The image bearers once again become fit to truly reflect perfect God in a fallen, broken, world.

Christ pursues the sinner all the way with divine love. But let us not become complacent, for we read in the epistle lesson that the same accuser that deceived humanity in the garden, Satan, still seeks to destroy the image bearers with a hellish hate. How dare that God would choose these fleshly beings to bear the Divine Image! That job should have been given to the heavenly host! But being bypassed in this role created in Satan an envy and hate that would never be assuaged. Satan hates us and desires nothing more than to drag as many human beings to perdition as he and his fellow evil spirit can.

But we are sophisticated and enlightened beings. We might think that there is a benevolent intelligence behind the world and our existence, but surely all this talk of evil spirits, of Satan, is merely old wives tales. Surely no benevolent god would tolerate the existence of a place of eternal torment. It would be cruel enough to have a place of eternal isolation, but eternal torment?! May it never be!!

We post-Enlightenment humans think we are so sophisticated. A good God wouldn't allow people to be tortured eternally. The God of the Bible doesn't meet our approval – we reject Him or make Him into a senile grandfatherly gent. We change our conception of God to fit our preferences. We do not countenance God as He has revealed Himself, but rather we make God fit our image.

The modern tendency in preaching is to avoid talk of Satan, Hell, or eternal conscious torment. People do not like to hear about these ideas. We don't like to talk of judgement. We have a disdain of scaring people into conversion.

Now to be fair, I have been in this camp too. It wasn't that I denied the reality of hell, or of evil personal beings, but that I wanted people to follow Christ out of the love of God and not out of fear. I thought it inappropriate to scare people into Christianity. I wanted to convince them strictly of the blessings of God and to motivate people by the love of God, and thus I avoided talk of judgement and of the very real and terrifying possibility of hell.

The bottom line, though, is that, either out of fear or love, one must confess the name of Jesus. And one will face judgement and torment if Jesus is rejected. So to be "kind" to someone, to avoid offending their sensibilities, to minimize the terror of denying Christ, is the worst kind of cruelty. Yes, we want people to love God, to respond in gratitude and faith and to be motivated by the goodness of God. But to minimize the reality of hell to a world that is headed there is to align oneself with Satan: he doesn't want humans who do not confess Christ to know where they are headed either.

Talking to others about God, talking among ourselves about God, is very similar to how we teach moral behavior to children. Young children have neither the intellectual ability or the emotional bonds to initially obey their parents out of devotion. The moral training of young children must involve some negative consequences for bad behavior. If there are no negative consequences, the child learns quickly that he is in control, and not the parents. Worse than that, the child does not learn right and wrong, and he does not learn about authority and boundaries, and he will never learn to obey his parents out of devotion. We cannot move children directly to devotion. Devotion starts with a fear of negative consequences. Unfortunately, children raised like this are typically the most unhappy of people.

Are all of us not like little children when first coming to faith? Certainly the primary cause of conversion is that God changes the heart through the hearing of the Word of God. But in the hearing of God's word, we generally are first convicted of sin. We realize that we are on the road to hell and the first steps of faith then are made to avoid hell. This may be either the hell we have made for ourselves on earth or the hell we are headed to eternally.

For us, the believers here at Christ the King Anglican Church, let us not hesitate to acknowledge both the reality and the horror of hell, as well as the reality of malign spirits. Currently, Universalism is running rampant in the church because we cannot imagine the

horror of eternal conscious torment. Universalism is the idea that every person will eventually be admitted into the presence of God. It asserts that every person must undergo a purgation in the afterlife in order to enter into the presence of God, but in time, in the ages to come, all will be reconciled to God. The problem with Universalism is that it leads to apostasy. Many Universalists realize that they don't like other things about God either and so as they deconstruct what God has revealed about Himself; they deconstruct their faith until there is nothing left. Sin, hell, Satan—eliminating one of these will lead to the eventual elimination of all. It also eliminates the evangelistic impulse; yet we are commanded to go into all the world, baptizing in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and making disciples of all men. This is the indefatigable love of God pursuing the lost sheep, searching for the lost coin.

If we tell ourselves, “I refuse to believe in a God that allows eternal conscious torment,” then this is foolishness. The reality is simply that God is God and He will ordain what He will without regard to our sensibilities. God formed the universe as He saw fit and this stands without regard any human’s approval of it. We might as well declare, “I really have a problem with the law of gravity.” Well, one's opinion of gravity makes no difference at all. There is nothing to be done about it. One's feeling about reality are irrelevant to its existence. A person could perhaps demonstrate his contempt for gravity by walking off of a cliff, but the facts of creation remain, and contempt of these facts lead to destruction of opposers, not destruction of the facts.

At the end of the day, reality is reality—it does not matter if the thought is unbearable or not—and if the choice is eternal bliss or eternal damnation – well, sign me up for eternal bliss.

At the same time, let us admit that we do not have perfect knowledge of the afterlife. I cannot require that one believe that eternal conscious torment is the mode of existence for the unrepentant. Honestly, this is a struggle for me, on an emotional level, as well. But we know there is a judgement. We confess as much in the creed when we say, “And He will come again to judge the quick and the dead,” and we read about it in the Bible – see Matthew 25 and Revelation 20. For example, Rev. 20:15 reads, “And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.” Know that we will be judged, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to interpret the lake of fire as anything but a place of torment. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).

To deny the reality of such things is the height of pride, and those who display such pride will not stand in the judgment. Do not be proud. Pride is not a virtue, it is the downfall of humanity.

Now our epistle lesson is very fitting in this, our so-called "Pride" month (although I would like to know when Gluttony month begins). Pride has long been identified as a cardinal sin; the scriptures warn us to not be boastful, but to learn and practice humility. The Epistle this morning begins,

ALL of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

God resisteth the proud and giveth grace to the humble. Just as it was in the Garden of Eden, pride sets itself up against God; but humility submits to God, and therefore submits to each other. Will we shake our fists at God? Angry about this and indignant about that? Do we pretend to judge God?

We all know that there is injustice in the world. We see the innocent victimized, we see the powerful flaunt the law without any repercussions, we see the untimely deaths of our loved ones. Yet we are called to endure these trials not with anger and railings, which are ultimately an expression of the self, and prideful. No, we are called in this passage to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. But note too that this is not without a blessing. The passage doesn't say, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God for no good reason at all." It says humble yourselves, "That He may exalt you in due time." All suffering for the love of God will find its just reward, its surest fulfillment. Sometimes our reward is made evident in this world; but most surely, it is revealed in the life of the world to come.

But then the epistle continues, "casting all your care upon him; for He careth for you." We do not suffer and struggle in this world apart from the gaze of the eyes of God. He sees everything, and He knows our sufferings and our tears. He knows the heartache of life. He knows the sorrow of death. And He tells us to lay these burdens upon Him because He is not a distant unsympathetic God, but a God that loves us and has experienced loss Himself, as a human being. God cares for you. Jesus knows your sorrow. We do not suffer alone, but are strengthened by God to endure the burdens of this life.

Humility saves us, but pride will be, once again, our downfall. The devil, and the spirits aligned with him, are real. They seek every prideful thought to drag us down. They seek to undermine our faith. The devil tells us that God does not care, that Jesus has turned His back upon us. These are all lies through which the devil seeks to destroy us. Do not listen to such doubts, but resist them, standing steadfast in the faith. The righteous man will suffer in this

world just like Christ suffered. We are called to pour out our lives for the sake of others just like Christ poured Himself out for us. The righteous will live by faith, and will stand as a soldier, taking the blows of life out of love for God. And the righteous will find their eternal reward.

Our lives in this world are not primarily about pleasures or happiness. Our lives are about being purged of our pride, and in all humility, being filled with the love of God following Him wherever He may lead. And we will persevere in this task or we will be devoured. These are our options. Christ pursues us with eternal love, but will we hold steadfastly on to Him as faithful soldiers until our lives' ends? May our answer ever be, "Yes Lord, I will follow Thee. Yes Lord, teach me humility. Teach me to love you always more deeply so that I may resist temptation in the day of trial."

And now as a token of God's love for us and a sign that we are very members incorporate into the Body of Christ, with our names written in the Lamb's Book of Life, let us prepare to approach God's throne of grace and partake in the sacrament as He commands us to do.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.