

There are a few things that we should notice about this morning's Collect. First, it is a prayer which specifically mentions the Church. Most of the collects petition God for "Us" so when the Church is named as the object of the prayer, we should pay attention. There is an emphasis upon our collected oneness. Then note also, that we, the Church, are not portrayed as independent or self-sustaining. The Church is described in terms that suggest helplessness, both from foes that are at work within her, from which she needs to be cleansed and purged, and from adversaries outside, from which she needs defense.

Now the solution to this problem is not just that we should be alert and on guard. We should in fact be so. But the real defense and protection of the Church, the Bride of Christ, is the husband of the Church, Jesus Christ along with God the Father. It is God who will succor and preserve the Church in her distress. Certainly we are not to be foolish in our leadership, administration, or discipline within the Church, but the point here is that even our best efforts will be inadequate considering what we are up against. So let us not neglect to be watchful or to pursue excellence in our administration. But our real task as members of the Church, is to be drawn ever more deeply into the love of God through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Ghost.

Of course there is also a tendency for small tight knit communities to have an "us vs. them" mentality. We naturally draw inward from both real and also imagined attacks. We circle the wagons and take up a defensive posture, keeping the world out. The problem is that this isn't the posture of Christian community or Christian individuals. We are called to go into all the world, preaching, teaching, baptizing, discipling. We do not have the option to circle the wagons. We must embrace all people within the world and that opens us up to many dangers. If our obedience leads us into tribulation, then praise be to God, we are doing what we ought to do!

Our helplessness, as the Church and as individuals within her, is beautifully portrayed for us in today's gospel. There we read the story of the widow of Nain and her son who has recently died. First, let us consider the young man. We are not told how he died – if he suffered or if this was a quick illness or if it was the result of an injury or how long he had been dead. He has no agency of his own. He is unconscious, and unaware of the mourning and grief that surrounds him. He is unable to participate in life – of course, he's dead. In his

own strength and power, he has no life and therefore he portrays us perfectly.

Then there is the young man's mother. First, we note that she is stricken with great grief because Christ sees her and is moved with compassion for her sorrow saying to her, "Weep not." From one of us, these words would seem hollow, but Christ, having the power and knowing her deepest needs and anxieties was able to offer these words as genuine comfort. Behind her obvious sense of loss is also her sense of desperation. Women were not able to really provide for themselves in the ancient world. Women were always attached to households with men in them, either their husbands or their fathers and family. This woman had lost her husband so she was dependent upon the money and food that her son could bring into the house, but now this son had also been taken away. The plight of this widow truly was quite desperate. What was she to do? She was burdened with grief and need. What was she to do? Her husband had been taken away, her son had been taken away, so it seems that she had no where to turn.

Of course we know what happens. Christ stops the bier. "And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother." In a moment, everything had changed. First, Christ enlivens the young man. his spirit returns, his agency is restored, and his ability to provide is reestablished. Yet this is not the extent of Christ's ministry here for Jesus then delivers the son to the mother. He is a gift to her. In the raising of the Son, Jesus restores her life as well. Her grief is turned to joy and her desperation is turned to hope.

What the gospel lesson provides here is a picture of the nascent Church on the night before the resurrection. The Son had been taken away, and the Mother, the small group of disciples and those who followed Christ, was bereft of hope and filled with despair. But God restored the Son. Christ rose from death and delivered Himself to Mother Church. The despair was transformed into unmitigated joy and hope.

What we should not miss however, what we should not fail to see, is that the continuing life and health and wholeness of the Church is still to be found in the Son. In this world, our mothers are the source of our nourishment, but let us not think that this mother survives independently. For in the gospel story, the widow's son actually had stepped into the role of

husband. It was from the son that the widow drew her life, and it is no different with us. Our mother the Church sustains us her Children, but she can do so only because the Son of God is her Husband. Her vitality is drawn from the Body and Blood of Her Husband who in giving His life and in conquering death and hades, continues to sustain her through all adversities.

The plight of the Church, and thus also of Her members, will always continue in this world. As the world hated Christ, so it hates all those who belong to Christ. Now we should not go looking for trouble, but likewise we must not be bullied into silence. We must speak the Truth of Christ in love into a world that will attack us for doing so. Our lives and safety are found in the Church, and the Church's life and safety is found in Her Husband, Jesus Christ. Against Him, all attacks will only serve to further the Kingdom of God.

This theme continues with the message of St. Paul in this morning's lesson from the Epistle to the Ephesians chapter 3. Our reading begins, "I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory." Tribulations were the norm for St. Paul. There is nothing implied in scripture that suggests that the holier we become, the less difficult life becomes. In fact, if we can generalize anything, the exact opposite is true. Holiness comes from tribulation. An easy life serves to keep us away from Christ, it does not draw us deeper into fellowship with Him. And those who pursue Christ with greater zeal will often drawn the greatest condemnation and attacks from the world.

But the simple fact here is that the tribulations of the Church result in greater glory for Her. Christ has restored us to the eternal life, the life of the divine. Through that life, we must battle against the spiritual inertia of the world. Now it may be great to talk about this, but it is another thing entirely to actually be called upon to endure such tribulations. But we must always remember that they are not punishments for those who are faithful, but are meant for our growth and the growth of the kingdom of God.

And this battle we will not win if we disconnect from worshiping our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, for it is through worship, and particularly through our corporate worship around the Table of the Lord, that we truly enter into the life of God. It is in worship that our spiritual strength and vitality develop. Paul "bows (his) knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ, of whom the whole family (that is the Church) in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man." In his submission to the Triune God, Paul sees the increase of the life of God given, not just to him, but to the whole Church.

And Paul's desire for the church family at Ephesus is that they would be more fully connected to God in the love of Christ – that they would be, "filled with all the fulness of God." Paul wants the Ephesian Church to comprehend and experience the entire scope of the love and goodness of God which is so grand that he cannot adequately describe it. Instead we are bombarded with a string of adjectives as an attempt to present the goodness of God to us. "That ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God." How does one communicate the very best thing in the created universe and beyond the created universe? That is what we have through being part of the Church, being members of the Body of Christ. The love of God is poured out upon us and elevates us into the eternal life of God.

Why is St. Paul drawing our attention to the greatness of God here? Because an awareness of the indescribable love that God has for us, an awareness of the supreme goodness of God directed toward us, is required to sustain one through the tribulations of life. Understand that St. Paul's life was no walk in the park. He suffered greatly in order to bring the message of Christ to the Roman Empire. He eventually lost his life doing just that, but in Paul's mind, this isn't a tragedy, this is the goodness of God. Paul was compelled by the goodness and love of God to share the truth of God in Jesus Christ with the world, for Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. By Christ, all things are comprehended, and the meaning of life is revealed. It is in tragedy that all of this comes most clearly into focus.

And armed with the love of God and her steadfast love for God, the Church carries on defiantly in the face of the adversities that await her, knowing that, not only is God supremely good, but God is supremely powerful and able to accomplish all that He desires, in order to protect His Bride and to bring her to completion in saving all of those He would. God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us. This is not about escaping tribulation. This is about embracing

tribulation for the greater glory that it works in us and for the kingdom. All of this is only because God defends the Church and God empowers the Church through Her Husband, the Lord Jesus Christ. On her own, disconnected from a lively and steadfast faith, disconnected from committed and diligent prayers and worship, the Church will not stand. She will capitulate to the powers of the world that seek to tear Her down.

Jesus enlivened the young man from Nain, and restored him to his mother. The Son of God had visited His people, and the Bride of the Son, the Mother of us all, was rescued from desperation, was reborn to receive the fulness of the love and goodness of God. That enlivening presence continues with us every day, but especially in our corporate worship. This morning may we experience the fulness of God as He gives Himself to us in the Eucharist for He still visits His people. May our imaginations be filled with all the goodness of God, may we understand the power of God, that He is our protector and defender. May we be sensitive to His leading. And may we then obey that prompting, even when it exposes us to various troubles, because we have every confidence of His omnipotence, and He will do above all that we ask or think.

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