

Last week, of course, was Trinity Sunday, the appointed day in the Church calendar where we, for at least one Sunday of the year, are encouraged to consider the mystery of God as He has revealed Himself to us. And as I am sure you are all aware, this Sunday marks a transition for us. The first half of the year, we walk with Jesus through the wonderful works of redemption that He accomplished for us and the creation at large. Now though, we enter into the season of spiritual growth, and this is why our liturgical color shifts to green.

But let us consider a couple of questions. First, what do we mean by spiritual growth? But what does this mean practically? And how do we actually accomplish this? Is there a process that we can follow to mature into Christ or are we just to figure this out in a haphazard way?

Let us begin answering this question by reaffirming that we do, in fact, have a Biblical imperative to pursue holiness. For example in Matthew 5:48, Jesus commands, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." St. Paul likewise in Philippians 2:12-13 admonishes us to, "... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." So we are to be perfected in Christ even as God the Father is. We are to work out our salvation as God works in us to transform us from sinful, rebellious beings, into beings that bring good pleasure to God. These and so many more passages demand that the Christian be not apathetic or passive in his pursuit of holiness. Rather let him be admonished by the Church and empowered by the grace of God which he has received in Christ Jesus to become more like our Savior and King, Jesus Christ. We are not given a pass to skip over doing the work of spiritual growth, so let us not procrastinate in this task.

But what about the process of spiritual growth? How do we actually "do" it? The answer to this question arises from early Christian monasticism for the monastics were dealing with this very issue. They had placed themselves under vows and within communities in order to learn holiness, but they found that those things alone were not sufficient to get them to this goal. Writers such as Origen, Evagrius, and Denys the Aeropagite described the process in three steps. The first step was to learn the physical discipline of not committing any given sin. The second was to look inward to examine the disordered affection of the heart for all sinful desires find their root in the hearts, the seat of our loves and emotions. And then this desire was to be either redirected toward the healthy goal or brought into proper balance. The last step was to rest in God, to look outward from ourselves and to enjoy the vision of the holy, the beatific vision, as it has been called.

These steps became known as Purgation → Illumination → and Union. They are sequential for a given sin, but not necessarily exclusive in general. A Christian might be

working through multiple issues in different stages at any given time. And he will experience this cycle of growth multiple times throughout his life, often as a result of some crisis with which he is dealing.

Finally in this process, it is important to name the categories of sins to which we are subject for how does one purge a sins that hasn't been identified? Generally our forefathers in the faith identified seven sins which became known as the seven deadly sins. This number isn't random, but comes from various Biblical texts. For example, the exodus from Egypt was often understood as an analogy for the salvation of the soul. On being liberated from bondage, the Hebrews had to conquer seven nations to cleanse and take possession of the promised land. And there is that mysterious passage in Matthew where the demon who is cast out of a man later returns with seven others to make the final condition of the man worse than his original condition.

So what are these sins? Many monastics, such as Evagrius and St. Gregory the great, compiled similar, but slightly different names for these seven (or eight) deadly sins. The list we will focus upon is from John Cassian and includes pride, vainglory/envy, dejection, wrath, sloth, covetousness, and lust. Each of these sins can be a focus for the three step process of purgation, illumination, and union. This then is a methodology for growth in holiness.

But then the second question that we should ask is, "Do the prayer book propers for the Trinity season, that is the Epistle, the Gospel, and the collect, make any sense in light of the goal of spiritual growth and the process outlined by the ancients?" In other words, are our Trinity lessons just randomly compiled or is there some methodology to their arrangement? Many have looked at the propers and concluded that there isn't a principle ordering their selection. However, David G. Phillips in 2004, completed a study of the Trinitytide propers and found a compelling rationale for their structure that we will be exploring during this season that I hope will provide all of us a methodological approach to spiritual growth for our souls' health. We do not have time to fully explore the basis of his conclusions this Sunday morning, but I will send a link to his paper in our weekly email for those who wish to read more about this approach.

Let us begin by noting that the readings that we have in our prayer book are basically the same as those found in the Sarum rite which was the medieval liturgy of Salisbury in England. But more than this, the Sarum lectionary traces its origin to *The Comes of St. Jerome*, a fifth century lectionary attributed to St. Jerome but which some scholars believe was developed by Claudianus Mamertus. This lectionary did not include our collects – the prayers which vary from week to week that speak to the primary spiritual theme based upon the readings. However, the collects were written about the same time and come from the

sacramentaries of St. Leo (Bishop of Rome from 440-461 AD), St. Gelasius (Bishop of Rome from 492-496 AD) and St. Gregory (Bishop of Rome from 590-604). The conclusion here is that our Trinitytide lectionary is of ancient composition and remains largely the same as it originally was. This on its own is quite incredible. We are reading the same readings and praying the same prayers that our brothers and sisters in Christ read and prayed 1500 years ago. This is one of the reasons that I love our tradition. We are not innovating based upon our perceived needs shaped by modern American consumerism. We join ourselves to the river of faith of the ages. We follow well worn tracks that speak incredibly profoundly to the human condition, to our condition.

But it also means that these lessons are rooted in the same epoch when the Christian monastic understanding of spiritual growth was taking shape. So we might expect the structure of Purgation → Illumination → and Union to superimpose itself in the readings. Couple this with the ancient understanding of the seven deadly sins, and we see a cycle of three, sevens. For the first 7 Sundays when the cycle begins, we are encouraged to purge ourselves of the seven sins. The 7 Sundays after that, we turn inward to examine our lives in light of scripture for the root of these seven sins. The final cycle of three, encourages us to look to God so that having been purged, and illuminated, we then seek union with God in Christ by the Holy Ghost. This is the ancient path of growing in holiness upon which we will walk together during this Trinity season.

So this cycle gives us 21 Sundays which does not quite fill out the entire season. To fill out the season, the first two Sundays after Trinity set before us the love of God, both His love in us and His love for us, as motivation in our journey. And the last Sunday of this process sets before us the perfected soul as our aspiration in this world, and our end in the world to come. So thus we fill out the 24 Sundays of Trinity – two introductory Sundays, the core cycle of 21 Sundays, and a Sunday of completion at the end. We have a long season this year so we will actually have 25 Sundays after Trinity, and we get to enjoy the complete cycle just described.

What I have set forth this morning is the map of the journey we will travel this Trinity season. But I apologize for not yet actually looking at our lessons today, so let's briefly turn our attention there. First let us look at the collect:

O GOD, the strength of all those who put their trust in thee; Mercifully accept our prayers; and because, through the weakness of our mortal nature, we can do no good thing without thee, grant us the help of thy grace, that in keeping thy commandments we may please thee, both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer brings to our attention that we are unable, on our own, to grow in holiness. Our

mortal nature, disordered by sin and subject to death, is weak. Therefore, as we enter into a season where we desire to grow into the likeness of Christ and to image God to a greater extent than we do, we must always plead for the grace of God to help us on our journey. We endeavor to work on ourselves by God's grace and for the love of God. He is our goal even while we focus upon our besetting sins.

This then, leads us to the epistle. "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love." Our love of God leads us to desire union with God. But there is a long journey that we must undertake to get from here to there, and we are warned in this passage that there are many temptation, struggles, sins, desires, that can derail our journey. We have begun well for God's love for us and His creation at large is the beginning point. And even more than this, we have been redeemed by Jesus and sealed with the Spirit of God. And if we persevere, we know that we shall end up united to God. But the reading ends with a warning that leads us to the gospel lesson: "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also."

We cannot claim to love God when we despise those around us, and Dives – the rich man in the parable from St. Luke's gospel - shows us the end of those who refuse God. Daily, this man had the means and the opportunity to loves his fellow man, and yet his heart was hardened, he continually denied aid to Lazarus, and this revealed to all that he had not the love of God in him. And those who refuse God now will not have God after this life is ended.

And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame."

Let this be a warning to us today. We are given agency in our lives, and we will be held accountable by God for them. We have a choice that faces us every day: will we pursue the love of God in holiness, endeavoring to lay aside the sin that so easily entangles us, or will we harden our hearts to God's love for us and the suffering that Christ endured for us? Brothers and sisters, I, of course, wish for us the former. With God every day is a fresh start. Put aside the failures of the past and reach forward strengthened by the grace of Christ aspiring to the greatest challenge and the most rewarding challenge. Let us together, especially during this Trinity season, begin once again on the path of growth toward God in holiness.

2024-06-02

First Sunday after Trinity

K. Bartel, 5

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