

Our collect today explicitly mentions the “Church” in the 3rd person. This is a bit unique. Most of our collects imply the church in the background of the text and generally instead, speak of “Us”, as in “strengthen us” or “help us”. So this is a detail to which we should pay attention when the Church is explicitly contained in a collect.

Now the Church is a corporate unity. It is a body and we, the baptized of the Lord, are it’s members. We are not the Church as individuals, we are the Church together. Individually we represent the whole, but the whole is greater than the sum of its pieces. We individually are temples of the Holy Spirit, but our corporate union is a greater temple than just a conglomeration of individuals. There is a real organic unity because we are spiritually bound together by Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, we have a tendency to think the Church needs us. After all, if there were no longer any Christians, it is hard for us to imagine there being a Church. But really we are not the essence of the Church. The Holy Spirit which binds us to Christ, and thus to each other, is the essence which is manifested in its officers and members. And, no doubt, if there were no longer any believers, God by the Spirit could extend the redemption in Christ to those He chose. The Church doesn’t need us in the sense that we think of the word “need”. She will not disappear if we all walk out the door – Christ will preserve His Bride. But as parents raise their children to contribute as adults in society, so the Church needs us to take up our places in her society as well.

In a real sense, then, it is we who need the Church. She is the hospital which heals us, the mother which nurtures us, and the radiant bride which reflects her Lord’s glory. We don’t come to God on our own terms. We come to God by being joined to His Body. If we despise His bride, like so many who in our life and times who call themselves Christians do, then we despise Our Lord. This isn’t to say that the Church is perfect. It is not. But it is being perfected, and we are being perfected in Christ along with it. Perhaps this is better said, we

are being perfected because we are united to her. Those “believers” who say, “I don’t need the church, I believe in Jesus without the church,” are in fact saying, “I will practice my religion on my own terms. I do not want a spiritual authority in my life.” I can offer no assurance to these persons. If you do not submit to the Church, then you do not submit to Christ.

Given our American individualism, we often tend to read St. Paul’s epistles in the singular. We take his use of the pronoun “you” to be a direction given to us individually, and certainly I would not deny that we should take his admonitions personally. However, St. Paul is writing to churches. He generally writes in the plural, and thus his admonitions are more appropriately taken to be for the church, the collective of believers who have been baptized. In 1 Corinthians, when he states that we are to flee sexual immorality, it is an exhortation both for the individual – each of us should not do such sinful things – and for the community – the Church is not to condone a notoriously immoral person in their community. This compromises the integrity of Christ, of Christ’s Bride, and individually of each of Her members.

The plural sense of St. Paul’s language is typically hidden by modern English translations. It is very easy for us to take the pronoun “You” to be in the singular when, in the original text, it is a second person plural. In old English Bibles like the King James Version, the pronoun, “Ye” is used. This indicates the subjective plural case. Paul is speaking primarily to the Church as a collective, not as individuals, when this archaic pronoun is used.

Such is the case with our epistle today. “I desire the YE (you all) faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.” Paul is speaking to the whole church at Ephesus. There is a “you” in this sentence as well, but it is in the objective case – it is the object of the pronoun “for” so we cannot discern the number of the sentence from it.

Now Ephesians is one of the prison epistles; Paul is under house arrest in Rome, and he does not want the Church at Ephesus to be overly troubled and fearful because of his imprisonment. Through Paul's imprisonment and suffering, God is working for His own glory, and if God be glorified, then all of His people will be glorified as well. We must yield ourselves to the suffering that God brings to us, letting the sufferings of Christ invest our personal trials with meaning so that it would glorify God. When we are suffering, we must liberate our fellow believers to carry on the work that God has for them to do. As the Apostle says, "For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." We submit to the trials that our Lord asks us to endure for the greater good of the Church. The Church for St. Paul, is the priority, not his own comfort. Isn't that what love is? Isn't that what Christ did? He sacrificed Himself so that the Church, His New Covenant people, would be established.

The Apostle continues in the epistle, "of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you (all), according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man." Here we see directly that St. Paul is thinking primarily about the collective of the members of Christ, the whole family, not only on earth, but also in heaven. All of the redeemed, the Old Testament saints, the New Testament saints who have passed on before us, and we ourselves (you and I) still continuing on earth, are included in the Church, the Communion of Saints of which we are a part, formed only because of the atoning and redeeming work of Christ. Paul is saying that he suffers personally so that the entire Body, with Christ as its head and union, and its members would be strengthened for the glory of all.

Now, when we get to the Gospel lesson today, we must ask the question, "Where do we see the Church mentioned in this passage?" Our tendency, when we read of the miracles of Christ, is to focus on the one who is healed, and rightly so in most cases, but we shouldn't miss what is happening with the other people in the narrative. In this case, let me suggest

that the main character in this passage is the widow, and she is a representative of the Church. Her dead and then risen son is a representative of fallen and then redeemed/enlivened humanity. This reading will bring a fresh perspective to our understanding of this miracle.

First of all, we notice that this isn't a married woman, but she is a widow. Her husband has been taken from her by death, and the passage starts with her son also being taken from her by death. We find the widow bereft and mourning her losses, left without provision, destitute.

But ... "the Lord saw her and had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not." Christ then stops the funeral procession. He stops what had become the normal order of things. Then the word of the Lord goes out, not as a request, but as a command, an imperative. "Young man, I say unto thee, Arise!" And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. The next sentence is interesting for us this morning because we don't see Jesus sending this young man on his way – back to work young man, back to the fields, back to the shop. No, the text says, "And he delivered him to his mother." When humanity is saved, we are not then cast out into the world to do our own thing. We are brought back to life again and delivered to our mother, the Church.

Now this relationship presents to us an interesting dynamic. First, it is a very ancient understanding that the Church is our mother. Our new life in Christ is birthed in the Church. She tends us when we are spiritually young and nurtures us into maturity. But then, like all parent-child relationships, the time comes when the mature children are required to tend to the needs of their parents. People get old and no longer can work or provide for themselves and so the children are required to return the care and love that they have received. This is simply the natural order of things in a fallen world.

So it is with the Church. She nurtures those who are new to the faith, but then in time when the young grow in wisdom and strength, they are expected to minister to their mother. They are expected to return the love that she has given them. Your membership in Christ requires your attention to the Church. Your ministry to your parish and to the broader church is not optional. You are not to merely consume, but to be filled for ministry, helping to prepare the bride for the return of her husband and for the marriage feast of the Lamb. You have been raised to new life by Christ, and He has delivered you to your mother.

Now this morning, let this not be taken by any of you to be a condemnation. Rather let it be inspiration. Don't read this as, "I have to do such and such." Read it as, "I have a ministry, I have a part in Christ's body. My service is for God's glory. I am gloriously invited to serve my Lord in the Church." Indeed you are, and it is a glorious calling indeed, for through your love for the Church, you will receive blessing and the fullness of life. When we pray in our collect that God would protect and defend His Church, we are, in effect, praying that God would make each of us like St. Paul, willing to suffer for the glory of the Bride of Christ.

This task is not for the faint-hearted. It is for the Sons and Daughters of God who are called to rise up and give of themselves for the Church. Will we be placed under house arrest for our faith? Will we be beheaded because we are Christians like so many martyrs in the early Church? Probably not. But most acts of love are about faithfulness in the small things, serving in the mundane ways, speaking and acting with courage in the everyday moments. We aren't living in Ancient Rome, but you are no less called to the service of your Mother, the Church. I both thank you for that service you have already rendered, and I challenge you continually to seek more ways in which you can serve.

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.