
¹ I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them, and all of them walked through the sea on dry ground. ² In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized into Moses. ³ All of them ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all of them drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that travelled with them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Yet God was not pleased with most of them, and their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. ⁶ These things happened as a warning to us, so that we would not crave evil things as they did, ⁷ or worship idols as some of them did. As the Scriptures say, "The people celebrated with feasting and drinking, and they indulged in pagan revelry." ⁸ And we must not engage in sexual immorality as some of them did, causing 23,000 of them to die in one day. ⁹ Nor should we put Christ to the test, as some of them did and then died from snakebites. ¹⁰ And don't grumble as some of them did, and then were destroyed by the angel of death. ¹¹ These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age. ¹² If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. ¹³ The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, He will show you a way out so that you can endure.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Over the past few weeks I've had more than one occasion when the topic of conversation was how people used to dress when they would 'come to church'. If you have seen photos of 50, 60, 80 (or more) years from the past you would see men with suits and ties, and ladies with long dresses and hats. It didn't matter the time of day, or the heat of day, that was the 'standard' of 'dress'. And, for the boys, confirmation meant going from shorts to getting the first suit, and having to 'sit with dad'.

Things have changed... Now, I don't want to get into a conversation about what we ought to be wearing for worship, but what I wish to do is to reflect a little on why people dressed like this: it was a sign that something important was happening – and just as people would 'get in their Sunday best' if they were meeting some 'important person', so, in the presence of God in worship (who is our King) people would dress in their best.

However, I would suspect that most people today would appreciate that suits and long, thick dresses is no longer the 'custom'. I would also suspect most people would say it's not what's on the outside that 'counts' (although, what we do wear is still not unimportant – we still want some 'attitude of respect'); However, I would suspect most of us would say, 'It's what's on the inside – in your 'heart, soul and mind' – that really 'matters'. It's this point – what's going on in the heart that really matters – that we wish to address today.

If you look at the Bible verse for today (on the insert in the bulletin) you will see that the Apostle Paul was writing to a Christian congregation where this was the problem: there was a 'heart/attitude' problem. And Paul does this by making a comparison with the people of old (the 'Old Testament people') and the people in that Christian congregation.

Paul says the 'people of old' in effect were God's 'baptised people' as they passed through the waters to be set free; likewise we are declared 'God's people' when we are baptised. Similarly, the 'people of old' received 'bread from heaven' (manna), and we receive 'bread from heaven' in Holy Communion. And just as we may hear God's Word (in the Bible), the people of old had a 'rock' which was Christ, who spoke God's word to them. Yet, Paul says, those people took God's grace for granted; it was like they thought that if they had it 'looking good on the outside' when it came to 'worship', then it didn't matter what they did away from

worship. It was as if the people thought: "God has rescued us from the enemy. We are 'His chosen people'. So, because He loves us, and said He would take care of us, we can do whatever we like..." It was like they said: "It doesn't really matter what we *do* because we have been baptised, we can go to communion, and we can 'go to church' and hear God say, "Your sins are forgiven".'

However, when it comes to Jesus' words in this regard, we hear in our Gospel this day – as people came to Jesus with terrible news about others who died in what we may call 'natural disasters', as well as those who had experienced brutality of others – we hear Jesus not 'judge' those people (He didn't try to explain 'why' this happened). Instead, Jesus said (twice!): "And I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too."

The whole theme of today's prayer and readings is about the special relationship between God and God's chosen people, and the responsibility the chosen people have toward God. Perhaps we have too easily said that God is love, and gives love to everyone, and forgives everyone – what is sometimes called "cheap grace." In our hearts (our 'sinful flesh') we want a God who loves us unconditionally – and what that really means we want a God who wants us in our own image. We want a God who lets us be unforgiving. We want a God who will let us say what we like about others (after all, 'aren't *they* bad people?'). We want a God who lets us do and say whatever we like about 'the church' (forgetting that it's really about 'the body of Jesus'). We want a God who lets us scream for our rights while denying others the same. We want a God who lets us judge, and divide, and moan. We really want a God who 'turns a blind eye' to a 'few things we may do 'wrong'.'

Now, if you think it doesn't matter what you think (about 'stuff' of this world, or about other people), and if you think it doesn't matter what you do (toward others, and toward God and worship), then we need to look again very carefully at the cross of Jesus. God's extraordinary love for us was bought at an incredible price. Jesus responded to the Father's unconditional love by abandoning everything. As Isaiah announces God's gracious invitation to anyone who thirsts: "Come to the waters!" – we see how God has shown His great love to *sinner*s in Jesus.

God is merciful, not punishing as we deserve, not automatically correlating our misdeeds with disasters. But there is no room for complacency: If we think we're standing, we should watch that we do not fall. There is a very real danger in 'spiritual complacency'. But the real danger in thinking 'It doesn't really matter' is not the 'wrong' we may do, or our 'indifference' toward God in worship (not that these are unimportant); *the real danger* in the long run the eyes of our hearts will be directed more to our own 'selves', and ultimately the eyes of *our heart will be directed away from Jesus*.

In reading for this sermon I encountered a story of a hospital chaplain who said that the calls she dreaded most were not from the accident ward, the psychiatric ward, or the morgue – but from the children's ward. One day she was called to the children's ward, and encountered a mother anxiously puffing away on cigarettes while here five-year-old daughter was having an operation to remove a large tumour from the brain. The mother said, "It's my punishment for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick." In response the chaplain said, ""The God I know wouldn't do something like that." Later, in her reflections, the chaplain said this: "The problem with my response was that it messed with the mother's worldview when she needed it most. I may have been able to reconcile a loving God with her daughter's brain tumour, but at the moment she could not: If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was willing to be the reason." Of course, what the mother was probably willing was the trouble her daughter was experiencing would be taken away from her in some way, and upon herself.

We all know deep in our hearts that if you 'keep on doing wrong things' it will eventually have 'consequences'. We also know that if our hearts are not correctly orientated toward God, and His Word, and His incredible redeeming love in Jesus, then we will come up with all sorts of 'strange ways' of trying to deal with 'stuff' that 'happens to us' in life. And we may know that 'bad stuff' may 'happen to us' that is not be the result of our own actions; but all this points to the fact that we live in a world affected by sin (which points also to our own sin). In this regard, we face 'testing', not only in terms of living as God's holy people, but having faith in God in every circumstance and time and place of life.

At times in our life it is easy (metaphorically speaking) to 'put the suit and tie' and pretend everything is 'all right with God'. The real 'problem' here, however, is not that people somehow think they are (almost 'magically') protected from sin and its consequences because they have been 'baptised' and 'go to church' and 'receive Holy Communion'. The real 'problem' is that in the end 'the heart' is 'turned away' from Jesus. That is why Jesus said 'Repent or perish'. If our lives are not centred on Him who is life, then we are focused on a world that says, 'death is the end'.

Our lives are to be lived 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, as 'Christian'. But this isn't some 'shirt and tie thing' of 'looking good'. Yes – we are to 'strive daily to lead a holy life'. But, as Isaiah said, 'Seek the Lord while He may be found', and as St. Paul said, "If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall", we seek to stand firm in the Lord. We seek to stand firm in the Lord Jesus and His incredible love for us at all times.

In baptism you are clothed in the precious blood of Jesus. In Holy Communion you are fed by the precious blood of Jesus. As we journey through life, Jesus is our Rock. In every moment of every day, and in every circumstance of life, we are to remember God's almighty and incredible saving love in Jesus. It is then that we will have true joy, true purpose, true peace, true hope, true love, and true life. Amen.