

Sermon for 26 September 2010
18 Pentecost; Proper 21, Year C

+In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Conjunctions are always a little tricky when they show up in Paul's epistles. When you read a "therefore" or an "even so", even if it's in the middle of the reading, it may well refer to a point some chapters back, or even to Paul's argument in everything that precedes it in the letter. Such is the case with this week's epistle. "But as for you, man of God," writes the Apostle to his beloved disciple Timothy, "shun all this, pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness." St. Paul contrasts the Christian life with something else. But what is the "all this" that we are meant to "shun"? You'll remember that Paul had just been talking about money, which he calls "a root of all kinds of evil," and those who developed the lectionary took that and gave us a theme, as it were, for all of this week's readings:

namely, the dangers of wealth. But, in fact, St. Paul spends much of the five-and-a-half chapters which precede today's reading spelling out what the "all this" he desires Timothy's church to shun, and love of money is just one aspect. Reading this rather discursive letter as a whole, we find that Timothy's church in Ephesus was beset by a myriad of false teachings and false teachers. Impious superstitions; speculation which both wasted time and drew people away from the Faith once received; consent to scandalous and illegal behavior; condemnation of perfectly proper, Christian activities, like getting married and even eating.

False teaching was legion in this little church, and so were those who propagated the heresies. Worst of all (and here's why money is the last danger Paul mentions) these false teachers were making a killing. They worked not only for their bread and butter, but for the kind of wealth that would make Solomon blush. They put their faith in

mammon, hoping that wealth would save them. This is what in theological terms is called a "false soteriology", which is simply the bad habit of trying to find life and truth and purpose and salvation where they are not to found. I call it a bad habit because it is something that we fallen people fall back into, time and time again. So did Blessed Paul, who counted himself the foremost of sinners. And so do we.

We are not in a world much different from Paul's, I'm afraid. I know that I am barraged every day with false objects of hope, and sinner that I am, sometimes I put my trust in those things, hoping to find salvation there: whether it's money, or the positive regard of my fellows, or self-sufficiency, or any of a number of countless idols the world constructs for me or I for myself. I suspect few of us are saintly enough to avoid placing our trust in these things from time to time;

but it is not at the altars set up by this sin-sick world where we find salvation.

Anyway, that is what it is to live life on the terms that the world has set for us, and that is what the apostle is warning us against. The good life, he says, is forged by virtues like righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. These are what St. Paul tells us to pursue, but the pursuit of these virtues isn't what leads to salvation, either. Rather they are the proper response to the gift of salvation already wrought upon the cross and given freely to those who would accept it. Salvation is not about who we are, but who it is we follow. Salvation is not even about how we live our lives, but who it is that gives us life.

Indeed, after he lists the virtues of the Christian life, Paul goes on to explain why we ought to cultivate them: *Fight the good fight, keep the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which*

you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. Our Lord made the good confession before Pontius Pilate, Paul tells us, and we find that confession in St. John's Gospel: *My kingdom is not of this world.* We are meant to live as a people set apart, because we really are. We, by virtue of our Baptism, are made citizens of a kingdom that is not of this world. We are a priestly people, brought by Baptism into the Mystical Body of Christ and continually fed and reconstituted by the Very Body of Christ. This is what Catholic man-of-letters William Cavanaugh was getting at when he said that we Christians find "the whole world in a wafer". We are, in a very real way, intimately connected to each other by the sacrament of Baptism, and we renew that connection at every Mass.

We have had a goodly number of Baptisms here at Saint Paul's in the last year-and-a-half, and we celebrate the Eucharist at least a couple of times

a week. I encourage you to treat each of these occasions as a reminder. Remember that good confession which you made all those years ago in the presence of so many witnesses. Recall your own renunciation of Satan and his wickedness, of all those evil powers and sinful desires which turn us against God and each other. Recall your own commitment to turn to Jesus Christ and accept Him as your savior, to put all your trust in him, to follow and obey Him as your Lord. These are not the demands and expectations of this world, but of the Kingdom into which we have all been adopted as God's servants and handmaids, His daughters and sons.

In the Fourth Century A.D., St. Ambrose of Milan, that Doctor of the Church and champion of the Faith in one of Christianity's darkest hours, wrote a hymn which remains popular on the feast days of Apostles. The hymn extols the virtue of those whom the church recognizes as saints, but

much of it applies equally to the ordinary saints of the church, the regular saints, like you and me, who are saints not by virtue of wondrous deeds, but by a simple confession of our belief in our Lord and our Baptism into His Body. From the third verse of that hymn:

Theirs is the steadfast faith of saints,
and hope that never yields nor faints;
and love of Christ in perfect glow
that lays the prince of this world low.

These aren't miraculous acts, but the simple acts of faith we are called to live out as baptized people: to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance. It is in living by these uncomplicated, but sometimes impossibly difficult virtues that we show forth to the world that though we are in the world, we are not of it. We show the world the power of the God in whom we find salvation. We show that in the waters of Baptism we are truly changed and will never be the same. We show the world that a little tasteless bread and bad wine are a greater source of strength than the

great feasts of the rich man. We show to the prince of this world that the Kingdom of God will prevail, and for this there is much rejoicing in Heaven.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, whose most dear Son said such comfortable words: *Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you;* grant that those who now draw near to thee to make their good confession may by thy Body and Blood be refreshed by thy Grace; grant that we may be renewed in our own love of thee, reminded of our own need of thee, and strengthened for the carrying out of thy will in a world which groans in expectation of the coming of thy Kingdom; through the same, thy son Jesus Christ who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*