

A Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity Sunday, August 30, 2009

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We are likely to misunderstand the epistle (2 Corinthians 3:4-9) if we are not clear what St. Paul means when he says the following: “God has made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” We might be tempted to read this as though he was saying that the literal meaning of God’s law is not important as long as we follow its general sense. Thus, we might transgress the “letter” of a commandment, but claim we were in some way faithful to its “spirit.”

This is not even remotely close to what St. Paul is saying. The “letter” St. Paul refers to is the Ten Commandments. The “spirit” is the Holy Spirit. The contrast is between the Old Testament, where the letters of the law were written in stone by God, and the New Testament where law is written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

The letter killeth. The Ten Commandments establish a code of conduct that reveals human sin. Even when we strive to obey the moral law, we still on occasion put other things before God, form idolatrous attachments, and fail to honor our parents or covet something that is not ours. And that is before we get to the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus tells us that anger is akin to murder and lust, the same as adultery (Matthew 5:21f.). Thus, the commandments bring upon us all the sentence of death, which is the punishment for sin.

In fact, as Paul explains in Romans (7:7-12), the law creates guilt. There can be no sin without a law. It is only a sin to steal once we have a commandment that says, “Thou shalt not steal.” You can see this in the home. Every child is free from guilt, in a sense, until we give that child a prohibition. Once we say, “Don’t go in that drawer,” we have made it a culpable offense to do so. And it is certain that the child will do the very thing that has been prohibited!

Thus, St. Paul describes the paradox of the moral law. “The commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death” (Romans 7:10). This is the same experience we have when we hear the commandments and give our hearty “amen,” but then look within ourselves and discover that our desires and actions aren’t always in accord with the assent of our mind.

But the Spirit gives life. The Holy Spirit resolves the dilemma in two ways. First, with the gift of the Spirit we receive forgiveness—“I believe in one baptism for the remission of sins.” Second, the Holy Spirit fills us with a new desire and ability to do what is right.

This is in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:33 (KJV):

This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

St. Paul says that the shining face of Moses revealed the glory of the Old Covenant. Moses saw God face-to-face on Mt. Sinai. When he descended with the commandments, his face was so luminous that the people could not continue to look at him. However, St. Paul says this was a fading glory. Over time, the face of Moses became less luminous. This reflects the fading glory of the Old Covenant.

There is an implied analogy (in 2 Corinthians 3) between the encounter Moses had with God and the encounter we have with Christ. Moses entered the presence of God on the mount and in the tabernacle and his face became luminous. We enter the presence of God through Christ in prayer and we are, likewise, transformed so that we begin to reflect the glory of Christ.

This is our experience in the liturgy. Just as Moses entered the sanctuary to see God, so we come into the sanctuary to behold the presence of Christ, who is the image of God. Through this encounter with Christ we are changed.

Unlike Moses, the glory that comes from our encounter with Christ does not fade. It is ever increasing. The ongoing renewal that is at the heart of the life of prayer looks forward to the ultimate renewal that will take place on the Day of Resurrection.

Of course, in contrast with Moses, the ever-increasing glory of life in Christ is not always shown in our outward appearance. Our face does not always shine. We all at some point in time begin to get physically weaker. The body gives out in various ways and becomes sick. Yet, in these mortal bodies we possess eternal glory.

St. Paul describes this paradox by saying,

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. *We are* troubled on every side, yet not distressed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body (2 Corinthians 4:7-10).

In other words, God's power is revealed through human weakness. We experience the glory of resurrection life through our experience of the cross. As St. Paul says, "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" 2 Cor. 4:16-17 KJV).

This New Covenant pattern of sharing in the cross and resurrection through the Spirit replaces the Old Covenant pattern, in which God's law led to sin, guilt, judgment and death—"for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life."

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