

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Easter, May 7, 2006

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“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (from the epistle, 1 Peter 2:11).

We will best understand the lessons for Eastertide if we know that they were first selected as readings directed to those newly baptized on Easter. The Easter season in the early church was a time of instruction for new Christians. For us, it is a time for renewed emphasis on what it means to live in the world in the light of the Cross and Resurrection.

St. Peter says, “I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims.” St. Peter is here comparing our status in the world with that of Abraham when he lived in the Promised Land. Abraham was a stranger and a pilgrim in the land of Canaan (cf. Genesis 23:4). He was not a citizen. He did not belong to any of the native tribes, yet God had promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land.

Thus, Abraham viewed his life in Canaan as a transitory and forward-looking existence. He lived his earthly life in the light of the future promise God had given him. This is how we are to see ourselves in the world. We are not citizens of the world in the sense that our true happiness is not located here. Our true identity and hope is in the coming kingdom of God. We are called to live in the present in the light of God’s promises to us in Christ.

Thus, St. Peter says to “abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.” Fleshly lusts are the ungoverned desires of fallen human nature—the desires that advertisements appeal to. We have various appetites and ambitions and there is no shortage of products and services that promise to give us what we want.

The problem is that when our desires are not governed by the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, we are led to pursue things that do not satisfy us. We can observe the following pattern in human nature. We have a strong desire, fulfillment is promised by some earthly object and we accept the offer. However, we discover, after some period of time, that the object does not fulfill us. It only leads us to want some supposedly greater thing; or it leads us to slavery. The thing that promised to make us happy becomes the thing to which we are addicted.

The soul that belongs to Christ desires to be free and, thus, is not satisfied with slavery to things. The soul that belongs to Christ desires union with God, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit and those genuine relationships that are possible in the Communion of the Saints. Lesser things leave the soul unfulfilled.

Now, to abstain from fleshly lusts is not the same as abstaining from all pleasurable things—although this is the way the Commandments are frequently misunderstood. Paradoxically, when we are controlled by our desires the things we would enjoy become less pleasurable. Conversely, the person who learns self-control, who learns to say no where God says no, who learns to draw boundaries that are consistent with the service of God, also learns to truly enjoy things.

To pursue the fulfillment of our appetites as the end of life is the very nature of idolatry. Idolatry is to worship and serve the creation rather than the Creator (cf. Romans 1:25). The idolater seeks created things—money, pleasure and power—as the end of life. The goal of his life is to acquire and maintain these things.

The servant of God seeks God first. Worship, prayer, obedience to the Commandments and good works are his primary focus. The servant of God sees the pleasures of life as gifts from the Creator to be enjoyed according to the instructions of the giver, with thanksgiving.

This ties back to Genesis and the fall of man. In the beginning, man was given dominion over the creation. However, through sin, because man heeded the voice of a created angel rather than the word of God, the creation came to have dominion over man. The ministry of the Son of God in becoming man, in dying, rising and ascending for us was to restore man to his rightful place of dominion. In Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, by prayer and spiritual disciplines, we can exercise dominion over the creation and the created things that once had dominion over us. This is how we experience Christ's Easter victory in our lives.

Now, to live this life of freedom in Christ requires that we have some real experience of the presence and power of Christ in our daily lives. St. Peter wrote these words in the epistle because he saw the Risen Christ and was changed by the experience. Having experienced the forgiveness of sins and union with God in Christ, Peter could identify the fleshly lusts as a poor alternative.

The exhortation to abstain from desires that are outside of God's will seems like so much moralizing if we do not know Christ. We have to taste the better things to be able to identify the counterfeits. The soul that has tasted the love of God in Christ will always long for more than the world can offer.

We must cultivate this experience of the presence of God in daily prayer. In Lent we spoke about doing without things and making room for prayer. Easter is not a time to abandon all that we have gained in Lent. Rather we change the focus of prayer from penitence to celebration.

We need to continue to make room in our lives each day for prayer and silence in the presence of God. We need to be present at the altar of God each week. We need to take our place in the body of Christ, to use our gifts and to benefit from the gifts of others. As we connect to the source of true fulfillment, the false promises of the world won't seem so attractive.

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