Tr3(2023)

**ANNOUCEMENTS**:

“O *LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom thou hast given an hearty desire to pray, may, by thy mighty aid, be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities*.” [Collect]

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 There is a common theme running through our lessons and collect for today. That theme is: how much God really does love and care about us.

 We see the fruit of his love and care within our own parish family. We notice when someone has missed a couple of Sundays or when someone is on the edge of tears. We have a prayer list including others not in our parish. We take action personally, as we would in our own families, and do not ignore another's hurt or suggest when they come to us that they instead go see so-and-so instead. We are a family and belong together.

 We see this sense of belonging, of being valued, in our opening prayer which was just re-read. God actually has given us a desire to pray for his personal help when we feel we are in need.

 The same point of belonging, of caring, of being valued, also is apparent in our Gospel. Jesus tells two stories in today's parable. Two stories which make the same point. Why might he have taken time to do that? Several explanations come to mind. First, it is quite possible that Jesus gave these examples in similar situations but a different times and they just were put together later since they seemed connected. Beyond that, any good teacher (or preacher for that) repeats himself on points he hopes his listeners will take away. But also, again, as with any good speaker, one tailors ones message to the crowd. A political "stump speech" is different from a political convention "sidewinder".

 Among Jesus listeners were rural folk such as fisherman and shepherds. But also likely in attendance were more domestic types such as housewives and merchants. Those listeners who spent most of their time outside, such as fishermen, farmers, and shepherds, would readily relate to a story about a lost sheep, a symbol of value. Those who spent most of their time indoors would relate to a story about a lost coin (which people had very few of), another symbol of value. From both the tale of the lost coin and the tale of the lost sheep the point is obvious: the Lord regards us as His **own** and rejoices when he can “reclaim” us.

 Our Epistle today also stresses how much God loves and cares about us. Yes, the devil is out there prowling about like a wolf licking his chops over a flock of sheep. But, as we heard, Peter gives his listeners, and us, words of encouragement and hope in times of trial when the devil is seemingly... unstoppable.

 When bad things happen to us the devil is delighted. He uses misfortune to try to lead us astray, to get us away from Jesus so that he then might... finish us off. He works on softening our resistance, to get us to give up.

 Thoughts come to us at such times as: “why me? why now??”, or “this is so unfair”, and “this is too much for me”. We may find ourselves thinking or saying, “it's all fine and dandy for others to tell me to, "keep a stiff upper lip" or "keep the faith", but they just don't know what I'm going through, or what this means”.

 Keeping our faith in times of trial can be a **real** trial in itself. Nonbelievers around us may mock us either to our face or, more likely, behind our backs along the lines of: “see what happens by going to church? [Or] See what being honest gets you?!” We might recall Job's wife doing just this when he was suffering on every front. She scolded him with: “Dost thou still retain thine integrity?? Curse God, and die”. In our lingo she was admonishing him to “get it over with” and at least have peace.

 Besides getting us to question our faith the devil can and does use times of trial to get us off the stray and narrow in the morals department. When afflictions befall us, as they do eventually for all, quick is the suggestion within our minds that, “yep, this is the time to take up smoking” or “you might as well just drown your sorrows”, or “you really need to feel young and carefree again, so go find another woman or man”. Needless to say, none of these paths are ones we ever should take.

 Saint Peter offers words of encouragement and hope by reminding his listeners that the same afflictions are “accomplished in your brethren”. There are two points in just this one short phrase. First, despite what the devil **wants** us to believe, others aresuffering and **have** previously suffered the same as we, or worse, perhaps much worse. Afflictions may vary among us (health, financial, legal) but each can be seriously trying and demanding. They "cast" us "down" to go back to the Latin root of "affliction", *affligere.* [ah-flea-GARE-eh] They strain; they agonize us.

 In any of these afflictions one can find himself saying, “I just can't take this anymore.” Again, other Christians are suffering similarly currently, and scores have suffered similarly or worse previously. In our suffering we are united together as brethren. We also are united to Christ who suffered mightily, and completely unfairly, for us.

 Our Christian “brethren” include not just those suffering today but also those who have suffered before. This latter group includes: the saints. One of the most powerful statements a Christian can make is, as we say in both our Creeds, “I believe in the Communion of saints”. We are brothers and sisters with folks already upstairs.

 This is worth pondering. While it may sound as if we are praying to a saint to use some special power, such as “St. Anthony help me find my wallet”, we really are engaging in a verbal shorthand. We really are saying, “St. Anthony, please bend Jesus' (or the Holy Spirit's) ear so that I might my wallet”.

 For this reason the Church long has had patron saints. We have patron saints for doctors and butchers (the same saint), St. Luke, patron saints for lawyers—Thomas More-- among other patron saints. We have patron saints for nurses and dentists, Alexis and Apollonia respectively. From last week, St. Barnabas is the patron saint of Cyprus. We have patron saints for travelers, athletes, pilots, and even surfers (St. Christopher).

 The reason for this patronal designation long has been the idea or belief that say, Thomas More as a lawyer and judge would be especially apt at putting or explaining our plight to the Lord to secure the very best aid for us. This of course does not mean that a **surfer** could or should not ask Thomas More's aid when out shooting the curls. Rather, it all is a tool to the realization that others have been where we are and were delivered by God from their own plight.

 While suffering, especially unfairly, is painful, it is a bond in which we share (in a family manner) the suffering of our leader and head of our body, Jesus. As we know from our lives, when our little toe hurts our entire body, even our mind, can feel “off”. And when our pinky toe finally gets better, our body feels normal again.

 To say that we are a Christian, a follower of Him who suffered mightily and grossly unfairly, means we—while never inviting it—are willing to bear some suffering too. It “runs in the family”, so to speak. When we suffer we touch the cross of Christ which he bore for our sins also. We say, this hurts me, too.

 If we were to claim to be a follower of Jesus but also always pray that nothing bad ever befall us, we would not be a true blue member of the Christian family. If mom and dad both have lost jobs, but junior has found one, it would not be familial for him to keep all the food **he** now can purchase under lock and key in his bedroom. Likewise, a soldier, policeman, or firefighter who never volunteers to go first into danger is not really being a team player, a brother, a part of the family.

 So, what should we do when something bad happens to us or a family member or our family in general? First, we should pray for help immediately. ("Storm heaven with prayers", as the saying goes.)

 Secondly we should offer up our suffering to Jesus as a sign that we recognize as part of his body, part of his family, we are hurting as he did. We did not ask for this test or “initiation” into his family, his body, but we are willing to endure, as he did, because are part of his family.

 Third, we need to remember that others currently are going through very similar sufferings. Many fellow Christian brethren are suffering precisely because they are Christian. We see this in stories from the Middle East, Sudan, China, and North Korea. Still others are suffering indirectly for being Christian. Maybe if they had been less honest, they would not have gotten into financial or legal trouble.

 Other Christians, are suffering not from other people but maybe from a grave illness such as from cancer or Covid. In these people we see nonetheless a hidden but real "touching" of the cross of Christ, of him who also suffered beyond just those around him: for us too, future sinners. (Touching is the human way of "connecting", be it as a fist-bump, handshake, hand on the shoulder, a hug, or a kiss, or, conversely, a slap.)

 Next we need to remember that we have friends in high places. We have brethren who have gone before us and now our in heaven near Our Lord. We can ask their help in bringing our woe to the Lord's attention.

 But probably equally important is the realization that we, despite having many sins, are nonetheless brothers and sisters through baptism and woe with the likes of Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Thomas More. They are our companions through our woe, and pretty good ones.

 Travail is never fun and we understandably do not seek it. When it happens the devil has a field day trying to ruin our relationship with the Lord. We can resist his advance by keeping mind, first, that this is a chance to show Jesus that I am part of your body, of your family. Secondly we should remember that we have brethren today going through the same or worse. Thirdly, we should remember that we are united to the multitude of saints who endured grave trials.

 We should also remember St. Paul's promise that the Holy Spirit will never let us be tested more than we can bear, but always provide a way out, at some point. Most of all though we need to do as St. Peter today instructed his listeners: “cast all our cares upon Jesus”.

 Indeed, Jesus invites us to do just that: cast our cares upon him. That is why he was born. Last Sunday I mentioned Baptism. It is at baptism that we receive a desire to pray to Him (the "invisible God only wise... hid from our eyes”, as one of our beloved hymns put it).

 This desire operates whether at peace, but especially whenever we are in danger. We became part of Jesus' family at that moment, part of his body which still endures danger and pain because of human sins. And it is when we, who are so much more valuable to him than any coin or a sheep combined, are out of danger and back in his arms that he himself and heaven rejoice. Amen. +