

Lent 3, 2017

“Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children.” (Ephesians 5.1)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Some of the old Altar hangings had the word ‘sanctus’ printed three times – ‘Sanctus, Santus, Sanctus’ – ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’. It was a simple, clear reminder to everybody that God the Eternal Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is Holy. He is perfect; He is the Author and Giver of life; He is the Saviour and Redeemer of the world; He is majestic, all-powerful, all-glorious, and He is holy. He is completely above and beyond; He is wholly ‘other’ than ourselves.

One preacher put it this way, “The primary meaning of holy is ‘separate.’ It comes from an ancient word that meant, ‘to cut,’ or ‘to separate.’ Perhaps even more accurate would be the phrase ‘a cut above something.’ When we find a garment or another piece of merchandise that is outstanding, that has a superior excellence, we use the expression that it is ‘a cut above the rest.

“This means that the one who is holy is uniquely holy, with no rivals or competition.

“When the Bible calls God holy it means primarily that God is transcendently separate. He is so far above and beyond us that He would be totally foreign to us except that he made himself relatable to us. To be holy is to be ‘other,’ to be different in a special way.” (RC Sproul)

This call to holiness is the subject of today’s Epistle. In his letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul likened holiness to the light, and unholy ways to the darkness. He was very specific and made quite a list of unholy behaviour. “Sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.... At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”

We should hear these words in connection with last week's Epistle. There is a continuing theme – our sanctification. Our progress in the Faith; our growth in holiness; our dwelling more and more in Christ Jesus and He in us. Last week, we heard St. Paul say, "This is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain from fornication; that every one of you should know how to keep his body in holiness and honour". It is a tall order, especially in today's world; but it is the Lord's command to us. St. Peter, in his first Epistle, also emphasized this. He said, "As He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1.16)

Matthew Henry, a Bible scholar and commentator, set holiness as a Christian duty. "Holiness," he said "is the desire and duty of every Christian. It must be in all affairs, in every condition, and towards all people. We must especially watch and pray against the sins to which we are inclined. The written word of God is the surest rule of a Christian's life, and by this rule we are commanded to be holy every way. God makes those holy whom he saves."

This is an important point: "God makes those holy whom He saves". He has sent His Holy Spirit to live in us. The Spirit reminds us and prompts us in the way of holiness. He teaches us the way of Christ and helps us to follow it. He brings to our mind the Lord's Word, and He blesses us with spiritual gifts to strengthen us in the new life. So, as Matthew Henry says, God makes those holy whom He saves. Ultimately, of course, the choice is ours. We are free to accept this Divine Counsellor and we are free to reject Him. But our sanctification and our happiness requires His help.

Today's Gospel brings to us the reality of God's power to help us. The Lord Jesus was casting out a devil which had kept a man from speaking. Although it is invisible, the spiritual dimension of life is very real. There are battles to be won and there is progress to be made. There is darkness to be illuminated and bad habits to be conquered. There are angels and there are demons, and we must not under-estimate the daily effort required in following what is good and holy; in keeping the house of our souls "swept and garnished".

All that we are talking about is possible. It *is* possible to grow in holiness. It is possible to swim against the stream of our culture and make progress. It is possible because the Lord Jesus Christ came from Heaven, suffered and died and

rose again for us. In Him we have new life. He sent His Spirit to live in us; so He gives us the strength and power and wisdom to overcome temptation. The Season of Lent is a time for our best efforts in the Christian life. It is a season for renewal in repentance and faith. It comes as the days lengthen and nature begins to wake from its long, cold winter's sleep. New life – that is the focus of Lent: the new life of Christ. The new life of holiness.

Perhaps we will close with this advice from E.B. Pusey, a Minister of the Church of England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “Be with God in your outward works. Refer them to Him; offer them to Him. Seek to do them in Him and for Him, and He will be with you in them, and they shall not hinder; but rather invite His Presence into your soul”.

In everything we do – from our daily chores to life's unpleasant challenges – let us try to remember the Lord and offer all to Him. And, as Pusey said, “Let us invite Him into our soul”. If we do, He will come, and He will help us to grow in holiness.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost be ascribed all majesty, dominion, power, honour and glory forever and ever. Amen.