

Trinity 2, 2017

“If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 St. John 3.17)

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

Last week’s Gospel presented the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Our bulletin cover depicted the poor, sick beggar, Lazarus, lying on the road with dogs licking the sores which plague his body. The neighbourhood dogs recognized Lazarus’ desperate need; but the rich man who lived on the other side of the wall, did not. Completely preoccupied with his own pleasure and self-importance, the rich man clothed himself in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. After death, Lazarus was carried by the angels into the bosom of Abraham. The rich man, however, ended up in hell – in eternal torments.

The reality of the rich man’s torment was probed deeply by Dante Alighieri, a fourteenth century Italian poet, in his classic work, The Divine Comedy. In the first part, called the Inferno, Dante becomes lost in a dark forest. Dante’s lostness is characteristic of our human condition and the isolation from God which comes with our greedy and selfish ways. Dante is helped by the ancient, Roman poet, Virgil who acts as his guide, and leads him through the under-world – through the depths of hell – so that he may eventually climb up into the light of paradise.

The depths of hell imagined by Dante are graphically laid out. Level by descending level he describes the state of those who have given their lives over to certain sins. For example, on the third level, he encounters the Gluttons. As one commentator wrote, “The glutton is a person with an uncontrolled appetite, who deliberately, in his or her own solitary way, converted natural foods into a sort of god, or at least an object of worship. Therefore, (in Dante’s poem), the glutton’s punishment is a reversal, and instead of eating the fine, delicate foods and wines of the world, he or she is forced to eat filth and mud. Instead of sitting in his or her comfortable house relishing all the sensual aspects of good food and good wine and good surroundings, he or she lies in the foul rain.” The picture of the foul rain and mud in this third level of hell is reminiscent of a pigsty. The gluttons have focused completely on their bellies – on the physical, the material. They have lived like pigs, and so they have ended up in the mud and in the stench reminiscent of a pig pen.

Interestingly, guarding the way of Gluttony, is Cerberus a three-headed beast. In Greek mythology, Cerberus has an insatiable appetite. His never-ending hunger is emphasized by his three mouths. In order to quiet him long enough to pass by, Virgil throws some of the foul, mucky dirt into each set of Cerberus' snarling jaws.

Although Dante's trip through the underworld, and his encounter with Cerberus and the Gluttons, may seem to be completely disconnected with our lives, think again! Consider the invitation in this morning's Gospel. People are invited to a great supper; however, when the time comes they begin to make excuses. One had bought a piece of property and wanted to go and see it; another had bought five yoke of oxen, and wanted to go try them out; and another was recently married, and asked to be excused. All of these may be good excuses in the world, but they are not acceptable to God.

For example, consider this parable in terms of the invitation before us to attend the Lord's Supper on Sunday. We all could make a hundred excuses. As the Exhortation (on page 90, BCP) says, "It is an easy matter for a man to say, I will not communicate because I am otherwise hindered with worldly business. But such excuses are not so easily accepted before God".

The thing is, there will always be an excuse. There will always be something to keep us from Church, if we look for it. There will always be something to keep us from reading our Bible, or from saying our prayers, or from calling and checking in with someone who is sick. The world has a never-ending list of excuses for us to choose from. Like Cerberus, the old man within us has an insatiable appetite for comfort, convenience and pleasure. And, if we feed it, that appetite will demand more and more and more.

One of the things that set the early Church apart in their culture was the willingness to give to those in need. Think about that. In order to give away something we value – be it money or time or a treasured possession – we have to swallow the fear of not having enough. We have to trust that the Lord will provide all of our needs. Yes, we may *want* to keep it; we may think we need it; and we may believe that our life depends upon it. But to these strong desires and to this material hunger, the Lord Jesus says, "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow."

This counter-cultural way is exactly what St. John spoke of in today's Epistle. "Marvel not," he said "if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren". Then he went on to identify the source of this Christian love. He said, "Hereby we know love, because He laid down His life for us." The model of true Love, wrote St. John, is Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. And, he said, the follower's of Christ must imitate His love. "We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren," wrote St. John. "But whoso has this world's good, and sees that his brother has need, and shuts up his heart against him; how does the love of God dwell in him?"

Of this, one commentator said: "Money is the test of character. The coveting of it when we do not have it. The hoarding of it, when we possess it beyond our necessities; and the refusing to help when it is in the power of our hand to do it – these alike are denounced by God". (REPEAT) The specifics of this comment are helpful in understanding what St. John is saying: "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"

Please do not think that I am advocating for every request for financial assistance. The volume of calls is overwhelming. Nevertheless, the Lord's commandment is that we love one another sacrificially in imitation of His love for us. This is a call away from my comfortable individualism to listen to others; to feel their pain; to empathize with them; and to respond to their need. In as much as money tests our character, so does time. Am I willing to give some of my time in order to meet or visit with someone face to face? St. John put it this way: "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed (action) and in truth."

Late in the Fall of 1623, John Donne the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England, suffered a nearly fatal illness, thought to be either typhus or a combination of a cold followed by a period of fever. During his convalescence he wrote a series of meditations and prayers on health, pain, and sickness that were published as a book. One of these meditations became famous. It reads as follows:

"No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any

man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

As members of Christ, we have become brothers and sisters in the same family. We are one Body – one family – in Christ, sharing the life of the same Holy Spirit. The reality of this fellowship demands that we care for one another; even that we lay down our life for one another as Jesus laid down His for us. This is what the Gospel is talking about: we have been invited by God the Holy Trinity to participate in the new life of His everlasting love. Our old, gluttonous man refuses the invitation because he wants to remain an individual, detached from the family. But, as Matthew Henry said, "This love (for one another) is the special fruit of our faith, and a certain sign of our being born again."

St. John agrees, for he says, "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren."

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...