

## Trinity 9, 2017

“Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted.” (1 Corinthians 10. 6ff)

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

Even after the LORD delivered the people of Israel from their slavery in Egypt by miraculously parting the waters of the Red Sea so that they walked on that ocean floor as if it was dry ground; and even though the LORD quenched the thirst of His people by causing water to flow from a rock at Massah and Meribah; and even though the LORD fed the Israelites with manna from Heaven, they often complained against Him and worshipped idols. As St. Paul said in this morning’s Epistle, they “lusted after evil things”.

As an example, Paul referenced how the Israelites asked Aaron to make them a golden calf when they were tired of waiting for Moses to come down from Mount Sinai, where God was giving him the Ten Commandments. “Make us gods who shall go before us,” they told Aaron. “As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him”. Tragically, it was done, complete with an altar. Then a feast was proclaimed. And then, the Scripture says, “They rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.”

What a slap in the face that was to the LORD. After all that He had done to save these people, they rejected Him for a golden calf that was made from their own jewellery. But their actions were really no different from Adam and Eve’s. In both cases, the Holy One was rejected in order to pursue selfish desires. This desire or craving is named as ‘lust’ by St. Paul. One scholar made this note: “In the Old Testament, the word is primarily used to describe idolatrous activities, and is accompanied by a warning of God's impending punishment on those with such an all-encompassing desire for inordinate affections. (Specifically), the lust involved Israel's strong desire to be like other nations, who worshipped their gods of wood and metal.”

The problem with any form of lust -- be it of a sexual nature or connected to the worship of idols or other material things – is its focus. Lust is an overwhelming or

intense desire. It has been described as an excessive craving: for power; for pleasure; for food; for sex. The problem comes when we give this craving room. Once we pay attention to it, and open our minds to it, just a little, we lose our focus. We drop our sights from Heavenly things to earthly things; from godly goals to worldly ones.

This is where it is helpful to remember the Gospel from two weeks ago: the miraculous feeding of the four thousand. It emphasized what God has done for us in Christ. Jesus took the seven loaves and gave thanks and broke them and gave them to the His disciples to distribute the bread to the people. It was a prefiguring – a preview – of what He Himself would soon do on the Cross. He, the Bread of Life, would offer Himself as the perfect Sacrifice for sin; and His Body would be broken – beaten, spit upon, whipped and nailed.

As a way of keeping God's Mercy in Christ before us – as a way of helping us remember and maintain a proper focus – the Altar is front and center in the Church. It says, "See, this is what the LORD has done for you. Your hope and salvation are here in holy communion with God the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit." "Your hope is not in yourself. There are too many things outside of your control. Your desire for control, and your attempts to find peace are futile. Go up to the Altar of God and be united to Him. His Love is perfect. It is strong. Patiently He is waiting for you to come and unburden yourself. Cast all your care upon Him."

As straightforward as that sounds, we all know the intense, internal battle with letting go and trusting God. We all struggle to trust His power and His timing. And that was the case with the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. Over and over and over they lost their focus on what He had done for them. And once that happened, they went from a place of gratitude and peace into a tailspin which ultimately was about wanting control. In that, they lusted after idols. They created their own gods and worshipped them. They thought they could manufacture a state of happiness if they defined the divine image and set the parameters of worship and the rules of the community.

In his book, The Bible Jesus Read, Philip Yancey (then the editor of the magazine Christianity Today) reflects on the third chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Specifically, verse 11: "*He (God) has made everything beautiful in its time; also He*

*has put eternity into man's mind...*". Yancey says, "Such an elegant phrase applies to much in human experience. Surely it hints at a religious instinct, an instinct that, to the bafflement of anthropologists, finds expression in every human society ever studied. Our hearts perceive eternity in ways other than religious as well." For example, the author of Ecclesiastes "sees with dazzling clarity the beauty in the created world". However, as Yancey points out, "An encounter with beauty or an experience of intense joy may cause us for a time to forget our true mortal state – but not for long. The child we held in our lap at dinnertime we scream at near bedtime." Though we try, we cannot shed the burden of our fallen humanity.

And so Yancey concludes, "A person may sense eternity in the heart and never turn to the God Who placed it there. For those who continue to live "under the sun" the author of Ecclesiastes has a simple message: you will surely fail to find what satisfies...You may fail on the positive side by frantically chasing wealth and success; or you may fail on the negative side by dropping out, giving up, and sinking into despair and the way of addiction. The account of decadence by the richest, wisest, most talented person in the world serves as a perfect allegory for what can happen when we lose sight of the Giver whose good gifts we enjoy."

This is exactly what happened to the people of Israel; and this is what St. Paul is speaking about in today's Epistle: "There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man...wherefore flee from idolatry. God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it".

It is true: the One Who has put eternity in our mind; the One Who has created all things with such order and beauty, wants us to be with Him. He calls to us by His Spirit; through His Word and Sacraments; by His people in the Church. And He has opened the door for us to come – in fact He came to us in the Person of His Son, so that we might come to Him. But still there is a responsibility for us to use all the means at our disposal to thank Him; to remember Him; to worship Him; to serve Him. And that is what today's Gospel is all about – prudence.

Prudence is exercising wisdom, common sense and good judgement in the use of earthly things. That's what the dishonest steward did: he used what he had to help himself. As followers of Christ, we need to do use prudence to maintain a

heavenly focus. The people of Israel lost that eternal focus. Time and again they forgot all the LORD had done for them and lusted after evil things.

Before us, dear friends, we have been given the answer. Remember what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for you. Think on Him often through the day. Use your time prudently, wisely for worship, thanksgiving and service to others. Let your thoughts be filled with His Love; and let His Truth be on your lips. We are not alone. He is with us by His Spirit, and He will help us. He is faithful.

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