

TRINITY NEWS

WEEK 07.
February 12, 2023

Sexagesima

In today's reading from Sirach - and the alternative from Deuteronomy - we are presented with choices: either the good or the evil; it's up to you. All you need is to do, to will to do and do what is good.

It's an external proposition, it comes from without - the good is something 'out there' that you have a choice to accept or reject. It comes down to a matter of will-power.

You must want to do good, but your motivation really doesn't matter, but in case you need some prodding it is made clear that choosing the bad incurs a punishment and if your decision is based solely on that, it doesn't matter because it's the act, not the motivation that counts. Fear is a perfectly acceptable reason to act.

This is the approach to morality that predominates in the Old Testament. It's not the only approach, but it is that which characterizes the Law - a law written on tablets. It also characterizes the religion of many Christians today. It is a religion of Laws that are to be obeyed, not because they are good in themselves (though they probably are) but because we are commanded to so.

But even in the Old Testament there are voices that point beyond this, that speak of a law written in our hearts, a law that we follow because we love what is good. And Paul I think sees this as what the morality of Jesus is all about. He often writes about the Old Law, the law written on tablets as a preparatory stage on the journey towards salvation, perhaps a necessary stage in the education of humanity: but what Christ demands of us in order to become mature in the faith is a change of heart so that we do good because we have come to love and desire that which is good for its own sake.

In the Sermon on the Mount from which our gospel reading is taken this morning, Jesus insists on the need for inner transformation. In it he reminds us that evil acts arise from evil dispositions, from internalized sin, we are in a way guilty of murder before we actually commit it. It is those dispositions that need to be changed; only then will we be able to really do good.

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But, as Paul points out time and time again, the problem is that we cannot make this inner change on our own; it requires a sort of spiritual strength that we have lost. This is where Christ comes in. Once we admit that we are incapable of choosing the good we can turn to Christ, and Christ will transform us.

Over time, if we let Christ work in us, doing good will not become a matter of our fear of punishment, but a matter of our desire, because it is what we want to do for its own sake, and more, what we are disposed to do, what we do naturally, because of who we have become. In other words, it will be what we do naturally because we will have overcome the fears that block us, and we will be motivated by love, which is, in the end, the same thing as good.

Again, as I say time and time again, all this is a process, all this takes time, patience and prayer. And it helps to be part of a community of persons who are traveling along the same path, and who meet regularly to be fed in Word and Sacrament, and so strengthened for our journey along the way.

In a little over two weeks we will be entering the season of Lent, a time in which we open ourselves to Christ and ask him to be with us as we think about our journey so far, what's holding us back, what we need to change in our lives and so forth. We should start thinking now about how we plan to spend that time, make the best use of it.

SAINTS:

Valentine, Martyr at Rome, c.269, 14 February. Valentine was a priest or a bishop of Terni who was martyred at Rome under the Emperor Claudius. The connection of this celebration with lovers seems to be either as the traditional day in mediæval belief when birds mated, or more likely as being linked with the pagan Lupercalia festival in Rome, which occurred on the Ides of February. For Christians, the day marks an acknowledgement of an all-loving God who blesses those who love one another, as Jesus implored his own disciples so to do.

Sigfrid, Bishop, Apostle of Sweden, 15 February. Sigfrid was most probably an Englishman sent by King Ethelred to assist in the evangelisation of Norway and Sweden in the eleventh century. He took with him two fellow missionaries, all three of whom were eventually consecrated bishops. Sigfrid was made Bishop of Vaxjo (pronounced Vek-sha) in Sweden, though his missionary journeys also took him into Denmark. He died in Vaxjo in 1045, much revered throughout Scandinavia.