

+

This morning we hear that passage of Scripture which is popular at weddings, and which we may recognize easier from a more modern translation of the Bible, which translates the word charity into love, *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.* This scripture decorates homes in needlepoint and in paintings, it is even heard in movies and television shows. Yet, as one Continuing Anglican Bishop wrote, this chapter is the most damning passages in the entire Bible. St. Paul writes, *if I can speak in the tongues of men and of angels...if I have faith that can move mountains...even if I do good works for the poor and needy...even if I offer myself to be burned [as a martyr] and have not charity...it is all for nothing.* Regardless of how talented we are, if we offer our gifts for the glory of God and for the use of His Church, and do not have charity for others it is all for nothing.

This morning's Epistle tells us that by His Holy Spirit God makes available to us the gift of charity. Charity is a gift that every Christian is expected to have. However, the word charity in the Epistle does not just mean acts of charity, like filling mite boxes during Lent, or giving to the poor and hungry, these are acts of charity. To be charitable, as the Epistle instructs us this morning is to imitate the Love of God. To show charity is to act for the good of another person no matter what it may cost us. Unlike romantic love, which is in no way a bad thing in itself, charity is not mainly a matter of feelings; charity is a matter of will and action, what we actually do. Charity is the gift which has the least to do with our favorite topic, ourselves. Charity is interested only in the welfare of other people and what we can do to promote it. To show charity is to act at all times just as Jesus did. To paraphrase St. Paul: a person who has charity puts up with everything and everybody in a kind and generous spirit; he never wants what he does not have already; he does not put himself forward or brag; he does not keep a list of wrongs; he takes no salacious interest in the wrongdoings of others.

This is an important lesson for us as we approach Ash Wednesday and Lent. Lent is a time for prayer, fasting, abstinence, and discipline. It is a season in which we are called to build up the virtue of Charity in our hearts, to help us to better appreciate the charity God shows us and to help us show charity to others. To help us along the Church has long encouraged fasting and abstinence, which refers to the amount and quality of food and drink we consume on Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and every Friday during Lent. Discipline refers to those activities that help us remove the distractions from our lives and to make more room in our hearts for Christ and His Love.

Lent begins and ends with fasting, but along with the discipline of fasting and abstinence, we should consider taking something else on, more physical exercise, perhaps, since the body is the temple of the Holy Ghost; or maybe we need to get serious about our prayer life and reading of the Scriptures. But regardless of what we choose to do this Lent, we certainly need to make a thorough examination of our conscience. We need to ask ourselves, "What is there in my life that is keeping me from a full commitment to Christ and the church?" "What can I do to get those distractions out of the way?" "Whom do I need to forgive and with whom do I need to get myself reconciled before it is too late?" "In what areas of my life do I need to learn charity." For if we try to keep Lent by fasting, praying and diving into the Scriptures but have not charity, then it is all useless. Regardless of our best intentions, without charity we are spiritually blinded, unable to see Christ, and unable to guide our lives through this world by His Holy Cross.

And so we are reminded this morning that God evaluates the quality of our lives not on our wealth or popularity, but on the basis of how much we love in the Christian sense. None of us do terribly well at it, that is why Jesus had to die, offering Himself for all mankind as the ultimate act of Charity, of God's love. Our duty this coming Lent and for the rest of our lives is to work to reflect the perfect charity of Christ, the kind of Charity that opens blinded eyes and offers Himself as the ultimate sacrifice for all others. There is no excuse for not praying for the grace to

love more, for not striving to love more. As St. John asks, *If a man say, 'I love God,' and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also.*

This morning we pray, *O Lord, who hast taught us that all our doings without charity are nothing worth: Send thy Holy Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all virtues, without which whoseover liveth is counted dead before thee. Grant this for thine only Son Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.*