

Last week, we reflected on the fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God, which means that we too are made to live in communion, communion with God and communion with one another. We see this played out in a very particular way in today's Gospel. Jesus begins His public ministry by proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Then, immediately following this proclamation, He gathers a community around Himself.

Heaven is not some utopia where we exist in isolation, but rather it is a kingdom, a community, and we only reach that kingdom by repenting of the sins that separate us from one another and living as a community in the here and now. This communitarian aspect is something that was clearly understood by the early Christians.

In the Book of the Acts of the Apostles while describing the life of the early Church, Luke tells us that "they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." Community life was one of the central marks of the early Church. They also recognized that when they gathered together in this way in prayer, that Christ was in their midst as well for, as He taught, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst."

Of course, as we know far too well, whenever two or three people gather together, it is also easy for divisions and rivalries to appear. This was just as much a danger in the early Church as it is now. In today's second reading from the Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, he is exhorting them to stop giving in the mounting rivalries among the brethren. "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose."

He makes it clear that division among Christians is not of God, but of Satan. This draws our mind back to Jesus' famous Last Supper discourse in the Gospel of John where He says, "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." (Jn 17:20) As Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel of John, they will know that you are my disciples by your love (Jn 13:35).

Jesus knew, however, that the community would be tested. In the Gospel of Luke we hear, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back you must strengthen your brothers." Quite fittingly, these words are written over the nave of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, a Church which serves more than any other as a visible symbol of our unity as Christians, a unity founded on the primacy of Peter.

Unfortunately today, just as in the days of Paul, our unity is being tested once again. People may no longer be saying, "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Cephas" or "I belong to Christ", but they are saying things like "I belong to Francis" or "I belong to Benedict" or "I am for truth" or "I am for compassion." Our Church is increasingly being divided both liturgically and theologically, between those who label themselves conservative or liberal... between those who step beyond mere preferences in the liturgy to exert that one form is legitimate while the other is not.

This growing division continues to wound the body of Christ to the point that some are already speaking about a possible schism. In reflecting on this, I am reminded of the words of Paul to the Galatians. "You were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve

one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another.”

Satan still desires to sift us like wheat and destroy the unity that we share as brothers and sisters in Christ. So we must cease biting and clawing at one another. Instead, we must look for opportunities to serve one another out of love. We must fight not each other, but instead against the sin which seeks to separate us from one another. We must fight to be united in one mind and one purpose so that we might continue to come together as one and manifest the love of Christ to the world through our unity.

We can only do this when we repent of the sins that separate us from one another and strive above all to allow the virtue of obedience grow within our hearts so that through our obedience to one another we might likewise be obedient to Christ’s commands. As He proclaimed once, He proclaims once again in our midst, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”