

send this

bookmark

print

close

The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.40 No.29

The First Sunday after Trinity

06/14/09

FOLLOW AFTER CHARITY.

The following is a sermon given by

Fr. Ralston for Quinquagesima.

FOLLOW AFTER CHARITY.

When, in the course of the hymn we have learned to call the thirteenth chapter of first Corinthians I come upon the verse "whether there be tongues, they shall cease", I consider this an admonition to any preacher or teacher who has the temerity to embark on explaining the inexplicable. In the face of what is beyond question a sublime poem, silence is the safer option than speech. For whatever is spoken is likely to be foolish. What can it add to what you have heard? Trying to gild this particular lily is not to be thought of.

And yet we must speak. Even as St. Augustine said about the Holy Trinity: we speak as fools, yet we dare not remain silent about so great a mystery.

Therefore, today we must speak of charity—lay down a few words once again at the foot of the altar of love, and run the risk of being foolish. However foolish we become, we can also be sure that the offering will be accepted, for love bears all things, even foolish speech about itself.

I.

One of the greatest mysteries about this hymn to charity is where it is placed in the Epistle St. Paul wrote to his Corinthian congregation during Eastertide of the year 55.

He has been dealing with all sorts of problems in the Church at Corinth. He writes to them about spiritual pride; disorder at the Holy Communion; quarrel-someness and schism and moral collapse in the congregation; problems about marriage and questions of adultery. In short, a real mess, not unlike our Episcopal Church today, or the church any day. He turns to a discussion of something acutely interesting to us right in the church.

First, he lays down an absolute condition, a definitive criterion: "No man speaking by the Spirit calleth Jesus accursed; and no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (12:3).

The Holy Spirit bears witness to Jesus. It speaks good of his holy Name. It cannot speak him ill. And so, too, is our recognition of Jesus as the Christ. It comes to us from God. It is not a matter of simple human understanding. When St. Peter cried out, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Blessed;" Jesus replied: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." The Spirit is the initiator of Faith. The Spirit discerns the reality of Jesus.

We cannot put him to the test. Neither history, nor science, nor psychology, nor sociology, nor philosophy, nor the shroud of Turin, nor experience of any kind can prove that Jesus is the Lord. Conviction about that comes by the Spirit, deep speaking unto deep. It is in the moral and spiritual order that we know the Lord and understand the Lord.

Second, St. Paul goes on to speak of the Church, those who acknowledge and participate in the Lord's life, the Body of Christ, of which each of us is a member "in particular." And he says all this comes from the one Holy Spirit into which we were all baptized. He uses an even more marvelous figure of speech: thinking of the water of Baptism, he says, "We have all been made to drink into one Spirit" (12:13).

He then writes of the variety of gifts manifested by the variety of members of the Church. Then he adds: "Covet earnestly the best gifts. And yet I show now, taking up the question of charismatic gifts and their manifestation unto you a more excellent way" (12:31).

What follows is the hymn to charity (chapter 13). St. Paul adds, having invoked this hymn: "And now abide faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity. Follow after charity."

The next section of the Epistle (chapter 14) is about tongues and interpretation. St. Paul is deeply concerned about the disorder and confusion which these ecstatic phenomena have brought into the congregation. He is worried lest the experience be sought for its own sake, and not for the Lord's, thereby becoming daemonic. Will people not say you are mad?

He is very clear about it: "I had rather speak five words with my understanding than ten thousand in an unknown tongue...For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace" (14:33). And he adds: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (14:40).

St. Paul does not deny the experiences of ecstasy, but he submits them to a rule, to the criterion of peace and order in the Church. He submits his own ecstatic experiences to this rule.

And right in the middle of his discussion of all these things he offers us the hymn.

To be continued...

The Rev'd William H. Ralston, Jr.

send this

bookmark

print

close

[Report Errors](#) | [Comments](#)

Copyright 2003 - 2004 St. John's Episcopal Church in Savannah, GA. All rights reserved.