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The Third Sunday after Trinity

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FOLLOW AFTER CHARITY III.

This concludes Fr. Ralston's sermon for Quinquagesima, on I Corinthians 13, the "Hymn to Charity".

FOLLOW AFTER CHARITY

III.

The place of this hymn, the greatest love poem in existence, in the context of St. Paul's arguments with his Corinthians congregation tells us what we need to know.

What is the spiritual life of the Church? Beyond services, tithes, preachings, tongues, ministries, prayers, and sacraments? The substance of the life of the Church is charity. St. Thomas Aquinas answered once and for all. "What is the value, the result of coming to Holy Communion?"—"Growth in charity." Nothing else will await us when time is fulfilled and rolled up and we stand in the presence of God. Without charity we are nothing. Without charity we shall be nothing.

We read this poem before Lent, just as we begin to go up to Jerusalem, as we embark on our preparation for and our participation in Jesus' passion. The universal hymn to charity and the remembrance of Jesus on his cross: the universal, absolute, whole divine charity embodied in the death of a particular human being, who died innocent and pure because he loved us enough to do it. "Follow after charity." Our response must be in our Lord's own words: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem."

Therefore it is all charity, and the universal, nameless love invoked in the hymn given us by St. Paul is identical with the specific act of charity offered by Jesus at his crucifixion. The point is made clear by the juxtaposition of these readings on this Sunday.

Now look for a moment at the poem. It is an astonishing structure, a triptych, in three great panels. It is the central stanza which defines love by giving us the charitable qualities of Jesus. He is not there by Name. Even more wonderful, he is there in fact. The substance of Jesus' loving life is the burning center of this hymn. The Lord Jesus is there, charity incarnate.

Let us hear once more.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels,

And have not charity,

I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal

And though I have the gift of prophecy,

And understand all mysteries and all knowledge;

And though I have all faith,

so that I could remove mountains,

And have not charity,

I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor;

And though I give my body to be burned,

And have not charity,

it profiteth me nothing.

This is the first great panel; it looks back to chapter 12. And balancing it on the other side, the third stanza looks forward to chapter 14.

Whether there be prophecies,

they shall fail;

Whether there be tongues,

they shall cease;

Whether there be knowledge,

it shall vanish away.

For we know in part,

and we prophesy in part;

But when that which is perfect is come,

then that which is in part shall be done away.

When I was a child, I spake as a child;
I understood as a child; I thought as a child:
But when I became a man,
I put away childish things
For now we see through a glass, darkly;
But then face to face:
Now I know in part;
But then shall I know
even as also I am known.

We all see darkly: it is the universal condition. But when knowledge comes, it will come to each of us in particular. We are redeemed all together, but each of us is saved as himself. Again it is the conjunction of the universal and the particular: "Now we see through a glass darkly"—"but then shall I know."

And so we come to the center—the pure, incandescent gold which is the priceless heart of this poem. It is a description of Jesus "in the Spirit", as love itself. Just as chapter thirteen is the center between chapters 12 and 14; so this is the epicenter of the poem itself.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind;
Charity envieth not;
Charity vaunteth not itself
Is not puffed up;
Doth not behave itself unseemly
Seeketh not her own
Is not easily provoked;
thinketh no evil;
rejoiceth not in iniquity,
but rejoiceth in the truth.
Beareth all things;
believeth all things;
Hopeth all things;

endureth all things.

And so we arrive at last at the final word, resounding like the deepest bell in the hearts of all human beings—the absolute, inexplicable, sovereign, universal truth; unarguable and almost unimaginable, except that we know it is so. Without it we would be the living dead. It is the whole meaning of Jesus in three words:

Charity never faileth.

It defines exactly what Jesus means by “Follow me.” He means,

Follow after Charity;

Charity never faileth.

WHR

The Rev'd William H. Ralston, Jr.

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