

**Psalm 73   Jeremiah 23:23-32   1 St. John 4:7-21   St. Luke 16:19- 31**

All sunshine makes a desert

There are two ditches on either side of the narrow path we walk on as followers of Jesus. The one is called self-pity and the other is called self-praise. Both are equally perilous to Christian travelers as in both cases they lose sight of the Way before them. There are many distractions in life that lead us closer to either one of these two ditches, but usually these distractions only become distractions because we have already taken our eyes off the main path before us.

In our readings for this First Sunday after Trinity we have good examples of both of these ditches. For instance, Asaph, the Psalmist fell into the first ditch of self-pity because his eyes settled on the apparent prosperity of those who were stuck in the second ditch of self-praise, and he became envious. And this distraction very nearly cost him his faith. Look at verses 13 and 14, “Surely,” he wrote, “I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning.” The basic problem in the Psalmist’s inner thought life was that somewhere along the line he began to think that if you believe in God you will be prosperous and nothing bad will ever happen to you. This is, of course, partially true, as who is blessed like the one who has the fullness of the Godhead bodily dwelling within them...the one whose hand is held by Almighty God Himself? But it is not necessarily true when it comes to health, wealth and all the other things the world claims to offer us. This is what is so wrong about some of the things being taught in the Church today, like the prosperity Gospel...you know, the ‘name it and claim it’ movement...you name it (Lord, I want this, that or the next thing); you claim it (this, that or the next thing, is mine

in the Name of Jesus) and, if you have enough faith, of course, it's yours. But...if you don't have enough faith...well, then shame on you and you deserve to go without. This type of teaching has led to the loss of many people who once thought that they were followers of Jesus. If you talk to them today they will either say they "tried" that Jesus stuff, but it didn't work for them or they will actually say that Jesus let them down.

And then there are those who, in the name of "tolerance" or "modernity", side with the views of the world rather than the will of God. They not only claim to still follow God even though they have blatantly dismissed His Word, but they also go out of their way to spread their poison, teaching people that the Scriptures are not to be trusted and that they are no longer applicable to our modern, enlightened times. And, of course, like all other heresies, this erroneous teaching is not new. Jesus said that such false teachers, who not only break the commandments themselves, but also teach others to do likewise, would be called the least in the kingdom of Heaven.

Jeremiah spoke very plainly against those who misled God's people into thinking that all was well when all was not well...when they really needed to repent of their wayward lifestyles and to turn back to following the God Who had made His will clear in His Word.

But you don't have to listen to the false teachers of the prosperity cult or the many forms of the "anything goes" cults to fall into this trap. I have heard many people say that they are mad at God for not giving them what they asked for in prayer. This is just bad theology. Whatever happened to "not my will, but Thy will be done" and the fact that God, Who Alone is omniscient and all-wise, always knows what is best for us and that He works all things together for the good of those who love Him?

In his Epistle, St. John felt compelled to warn his readers not to believe every spirit, but rather to test them to see whether or not they really were from God, because, like in Jeremiah's day and Jesus' day and our own day, many false prophets had gone out into the world. And the simple litmus test for St. John was that every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God. But the phrase "come in the flesh" is more than just the incarnation...St. John qualifies this statement time and time again throughout his Epistle in different ways. Jesus coming in the flesh includes the belief that Jesus is Divine and that He took on Human form, that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, the Christ, that access to the Father is through Jesus alone, that this access was granted by means of the death of Jesus on behalf of sinful mankind and that this act of self-sacrifice is the ultimate demonstration of God's love for His creatures. To assume anything contrary to this belief is to follow an ungodly spirit and to risk falling away from the truth.

Our Gospel lesson also reveals the behavior of those being controlled by their incorrect inner assumptions. For many, outward appearance is everything. The rich man, no doubt was highly respected by all who knew him, while Lazarus was despised and rejected and, sadly, neglected and left to literally rot. But the rich man himself had his own set of skewed assumptions, no doubt. I believe that he had quite a surprise when he opened his eyes 'on the other side' and saw that he was not in Abraham's bosom while Lazarus was. In fact, his faulty and arrogant way of reasoning doesn't seem to have changed much in hell either as he still thought he could tell others what to do! This only goes to show that even if people had a second chance to change their ways after death, they would most

probably make the same wrong choices all over again. C.S. Lewis hinted at this in his book, *The Great Divorce*, where a bus-load of lost souls take a trip to heaven only to return to hell in the end.

So, what is the bottom line here? It is simply this...all of us have to reexamine our hidden mental models from time to time to see if they match up with the way things really are...if they match up with the character of God and His will for us as His children. There is an old Arabic Proverb that says, “all sunshine makes a desert”. You see, we need the night and the rain and the storms and the cold and the wind as well as the sunshine if we are to grow more like Jesus...the bad works together with the good to shape us and remake us into His image. Indeed, it is very often during the really bad times that we grow the most spiritually. If we don’t learn this rather simple lesson, we will repeatedly stray into the ditches of self-pity or self-praise...we will either think we are fine while all along we are not, or we will become so preoccupied with our failures and faults that the joy of our salvation in Jesus gets sucked right out of us.

Now, how does one change these inner thoughts or mental models? Well, you first have to identify them with the help of God’s Spirit speaking within us through His Word. Like Asaph, the Psalmist, we have to figure out why we are in the ditch in the first place...how did we get there...what made us take our eyes off the Way before us...what distracted us and caused us to lose our focus? This, like most things worth doing, will take time and effort and honesty and humility. Many people don’t want to admit that their ideas are wrong...and one cannot remove something you refuse to admit is erroneous. Then, once you have identified incorrect thought patterns, make sure you know the Word of God well...all of it, not just the parts you like. Jesus constantly challenged the believers of

His day to reexamine their inner thought life. Remember the long list of “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...” in St. Matthew’s Gospel? Well, what Jesus was basically doing was telling people that what they had been taught needed to be relearned because their teachers had skewed the truth to suit their own purposes. If the people continued to follow the paths mapped out for them by these false prophets, they would repeatedly stumble into one of those two ditches...you can identify these kinds of people as you read the Gospels...the Pharisees, for instance, were clearly in the ditch of self-praise while the so-called ‘sinners’ were in the ditch of self-pity. Sometimes, the two ditches almost create each other...those in the self-praise ditch push those they esteem lower than themselves into the self-pity ditch by holding up unattainable standards that are simply not biblical.

So, there you have it. Asaph had to reexamine his thinking in the sanctuary of God...in the very presence of the One he thought had let him down...there his faulty thoughts were exposed for what they were and he was able to redirect his thought life to that which is more in line with God’s character and His purposes and plans. Jeremiah challenged his listeners to rethink what they had been taught. Jesus exposed the prosperity cult way of thinking of His day in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. And St. John showed that biblical love was defined by biblical faith in the biblical God revealed in the biblical records.

So, dearest beloved brethren, as you all come into the Sanctuary of God and specifically to His Table of plenty this day, ask the Holy Spirit to expose your faulty thought patterns as you behold the reality of His love for you demonstrated and portrayed in the Eucharist. And, if you find that you have strayed from the biblical Way and have ended up in one of

the two ditches of self-pity or self-praise, ask Him to help you to not only get out of your ditch, but to also help you lay aside the distractions that got you there in the first place.

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