

## Advent 4 2015 St Timothy

### **The Collect.**

O LORD, raise up, we pray thee, your power, and come among us, and with great might help us to lay aside the sin which so easily does beset us. And may your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us from sloth and from weakness, that we with joyful thanks might run the race that is set before us, through the power of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be all honor and glory, world with out end. Amen.

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and [the]\* dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen.

### **The Epistle. Phil 4:4-7**

REJOICE in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all under standing, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

### **The Gospel. John 1:19-28**

THIS is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us, What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

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### *A Miraculous Moderation*

For the Jews, the incarnation of God is an enormous scandal. And to the Greeks, the death of God was incomprehensible. Yet this is the heart of our religion. Last night we preached about the utter newness of our religion. Worldly historians and theologians tells us how similar Christianity is to the pagan myths of Egypt and Persia. No it isn't. You will hear many historians and theologians tell you how similar Christianity is to Judaism. No it isn't.

When Rome demanded that obeisance be made to the Roman emperor as an incarnation of God on earth, they had permitted a critical exemption to the Jews. They did not have to offer incense to the emperor because the emperor realized that this was a total contradiction to their mono-theism. So in an edict of toleration of all religions in their empire, the Romans gave the Jews an exemption. The Christians didn't claim this exemption. Why? Because they did not identify themselves as Jews.

As I have studied historian after historian, they all refuse to acknowledge the utter radicalness of Christianity. In our ethical and moral behavior, Paul enjoins all Christians: your moderation, which was one of the 4 cardinal virtues of Greco-Roman world, should be one of the key distinguishing features of your behavior in the world. Moderation means discipline. When other men fall into sin, they should see that we Christians constantly stand before temptation and choose the good.

Yes it is true that some of us will fall into sin from time to time. But when we sin, we have an advocate with the Father, and because of this, and the forgiveness that is in Christ, we begin each day with the same resolute determination to practice the discipline of our morality, to please God our Father, and to express our thanks to God for the redemption that is in his son.

Thus as we cast away the works of darkness, day after day and put upon ourselves the armor of light in the power of the Holy Spirit, we produce a new kind of community that is not without sin, but a community that produces substantial healing and renewal and reformation and renaissance in every area and in every department of human life. And down through the centuries, this has been the final apologetic for Christianity.

Because in Christianity there is true forgiveness; there is true hope. In Christianity there is the resolution of the deepest longing of the human soul for salvation, peace, joy and glory. And in Christianity there is true and substantial victory over sin. That's what historians cannot explain. They cannot explain the phenomenon of how Christianity came from absolute obscurity to dominate the world, and they cannot explain the victory over sin that individual Christians have in this religion. The reformation of character, the production of the fruits of the spirit, the tranquility of soul and the discipline intrinsic to our behavior. It is a miraculous moderation that they cannot explain.

Christ says to the Laodiceans: if you come to me, you must either fully embrace me or fully reject me. I will not accept moderation here. Moderation is an insult to the blood of the covenant. It is an insult to my Father. If you are neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. So in Christianity, there is this contrast: in our moral behavior it produces a moderation that the world cannot

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understand, but in our love and devotion to God, it demands everything. It demands our whole heart and soul and mind and strength. And if we willingly hold back anything from God – like Ananias and Sapphira held back from the Church, we will be accounted unworthy to be called the disciples of Christ.

Does this mean that there will be no hypocrisy in the Church? Does this mean that there will be no immature behavior in Churchman? Does this mean that there will not be significant sin in the lives of Christians? Of course not. And this hypocrisy and immaturity and this lack of love and this sin will be a significant stumbling block to people coming into the Church, seeking Christ, seeking salvation, seeking security, seeking sanity. And these things will become significant stumblingblocks to these people – especially our young people, who cannot understand the lack of discipline in our morality and our lukewarm commitment to our savior.

The Psalmist begs God at one point: ‘Lord I know I am a sinner, please prevent me from becoming a stumbling block in the way of those seeking to know you and obey you and love you. And the Apostle Paul too says be careful people. Be careful that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in *his* brother’s way. And the Gospels are immoderately severe on this very point: But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea.<sup>1</sup>

This is the contradiction that worldly historians and secular theologians cannot explain. How is it that a religion that is a complete stumblingblock to the Jews is so extraordinarily careful not to put a stumblingblock in the way of everyone else? And how is it that a religion that seemed like utter foolishness to the Greeks produced the most profound wisdom, the most profound thinkers the world has every see – beyond the wisdom of Solomon, beyond the comprehension and power of Zeus?

The answer is simple. It is so simple that a child can understand it. Paul says: Where are those famous Greek sophists now? Where are all those clever lawyers trained in the art making the innocent guilty and letting the guilty go free? Where is the rhetorician that can make folly truth and truth folly? Where are they all now? Paul asks. I will tell you where they all are. God has now made completely foolish the wisdom of this world?<sup>2</sup>

Just this week I heard yet another variant of the worldly explanation of the miracles of Jesus Christ. The explanation was that the miracles of Christ are in the Gospels accounts because Christ came in an age of magic. People believed in the Magi and people believed in magic. This is simply not true. Secular historians and secular theologians want this to be true. But it is not true. The universal response to the miracles of Christ was exactly the same response that you and I would have today if we saw them. They were absolutely extraordinary. So Christ tells the messengers of John the Baptist: *Go your way, and tell John what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, to the poor the gospel is preached.*

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This is why the wise of the world do not understand the wisdom of God and children do. Because the wise men of this world do not want to see the wisdom of God. God has thrust the truth of the Gospel in their faces, and yet they have turned from the truth and have twisted the truth and have shielded themselves from the truth in order to protect the sovereignty of sin in their lives, John says.

And if we are honest with ourselves, this is the same thing that is still at work in us who have repudiated sin and embraced the savior of the world. Sin still calls to us. It still tries to seduce us. It still lures us back to Egypt to enjoy its pleasures for a season. This is what tugs at us and silently, secretly cajoles us to stay home from Church. The same demonic force that persuades the wise men of this world to see magic where there is miracle is the same demonic force that whispers in our ears concerning Christ: 'in all things moderation, especially in your devotion to Christ.'

And again, if we are honest with ourselves, we could explain much of our own frustration and anxiety and fear and sense of failure in our lives. I would even go so far as to say that St. Timothy himself has entered the sirens' strait of sin. And it sings to us a familiar song of apathy and moderation. The honeymoon is over. We have built our church. The excitement is now over. Now it is time to return to other things. Nothing in excess.

There is a time and place for Church, but it must have its limits. There is a time and place for devotion, but it must have its limits. There is a time and place for discipline but it must have its limits. There is a time and place for obedience, but it must have its limits. There is a time and place for moderation, but it must have its limits. This is how Laodicea became neither hot nor cold - but lukewarm. It had lost its passion for Christ. And it had returned to its passion for sin.

And so this is a principle that I want to leave you with this morning. If we practice moderation in our love for Christ, we will become immoderate in our morality. That's why St. Paul says - let your moderation be known unto all men. You simply cannot fake moderation. It is the one thing that you cannot fake. Eventually - and sooner rather than later - the world will see that our personal religion is a sham. Our devotion is a sham. Our morality is a sham. And we will have joined the ranks of the moral hypocrites that we once so vehemently judged and condemned.

When this community looks at St. Timothy, I want them to see a moderation in morality that the world simply cannot achieve and cannot explain. When our community looks at the people of St. Timothy, I want them to see a religious devotion that they cannot achieve and cannot explain - not just in our devotion to Christ in theological matters, but our devotion to each other in love and courtesy and care and in our devotion to all things that pertain to our life together as a Church.

Our marriages rest upon the virtue of moderation and our marriage to each other as believers rests upon the virtue of moderation. Because moderation retrains the sin that would destroy our marriages and our love and our morality. I want the world to see in us that our moderation does not flow from magic. Our moderation flows from miracle. Our moderation flows from the miracle that something completely unexpected and immoderate has happened in our world. God has become flesh and dwelt among us. Let's not be modest about this.

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And let us not be modest in our devotion. Let the world see – let God see a miraculous moderation in us, through Jesus Christ our Lord - whose immoderate love for us went beyond anything that has ever happened in this world or will happen in this world. So that we, ultimately, might comprehend the incomprehensible love of Christ, the breadth, and length, and depth, and height of which passeth all knowledge, that we might be filled with all the miraculous moderation of God. - *Amen*

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<sup>1</sup> Mt 18:6

<sup>2</sup> 1Co 1:20