

### **The Collect**

O GOD, who hast prepared for those who love thee such good things as pass man's understanding; Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen....

### **The Epistle Romans 6:3-11**

KNOW ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **The Gospel. St. Matthew 5:20-26**

JESUS said unto his disciples, Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

## *Somewhere Between Egypt and Babylon*

One of our most persistent weaknesses as human beings is that we take that which does not change for granted. Thus we never properly appreciate how stable our environment is - *until* it is disrupted. When morale is lost in an organization we notice because our organization once had it. When discipline is lost, we know that we once had it. Likewise, when society struggles with a destabilizing political or even moral issue, this is unsettling to us only because society is generally stable and just - unless it is catastrophically lost through tyranny or war. We never notice good health until it is lost. In society and in ourselves.

And the rule of law is like that. And the providence of God is like that too. In America, God has given us a sane and a stable society in which we have life, liberty and many possibilities and opportunities to pursue our own happiness. And we take all this for granted. When we meet together every Sunday we try always to give thanks to God for this great country. Yes, there is considerable corruption in our government. But we would not notice corruption unless we had a practical standard of incorruption.

If we lived in a dictatorship or in a mafia or in a military state that knew nothing more than very high levels of corruption, we all would say - this is the way things are, why should we expect anything more than this?

But we live in America. In America we do expect more than this. The blood of our founding fathers has been shed to purchase our lives, our freedoms and our happiness. And we do them great disservice not to remember their sacrifice. And we do God a great disservice by not honoring them too. Because he provided those leaders. God provides all leaders - whether they are good ones or bad ones. Because they all provide a stable society so that we might live out our lives in peace.

God does not promise us a *just* society if we believe him and obey him. He promises us a stable society. He doesn't punish every injustice in the world; he sends his rain (and all other good things) upon the unjust as well as the just. This is the recurring problem within the wisdom literature of the Old Testament: Why aren't the bad guys punished for their sins. Why do the bad guys sometimes win? And when they do win, why do they remain in power for so long, even though they are constantly blaspheming God and oppressing God's people?

It's not until the New Testament comes that we are given an answer. There's going to be a resurrection. And there is going to be a final judgment. Then - and only then, will all the accounts be settled. Completely. Perfectly.

And that's why, as I keep saying, we are not to judge each other - especially those outside the Church. Because God will one day judge everyone who has ever lived in this world. The Church is not in the judging business. The Church is in the salvation business. Judgment will come soon enough. If we are in the salvation business, we want to delay God's judgement, not hasten it.

We have said that we must treat all men, no matter how wicked, as if they were on the brink of salvation, struggling with the truth deep within the inner man. No matter how wicked a man might

be, all men need salvation. And we are all ambassadors of that salvation. Our first and last question concerning anyone is this: "how can I work towards his salvation?"

We have until the final judgment. And while we are waiting for the Son to return in judgment, he wants all faithful followers of Christ to become good citizens in whatever country they find themselves in, as Paul teaches us in Romans 13.

Working to support the institutions that God has established - in which to pursue peace and the salvation of other men. We are to be like leaven in a loaf of bread. It is those who fear God and attempt to do his will that leavens society with morality, altruism, grace and peace. We must constantly remind ourselves of our relationship to the State. Our Kingdom is not of this world. We are leaven in the Kingdoms of this world. We are in the world but not of it.

All institutions have been given by God for this very purpose. The institution of marriage, the institution of family, of parents, of police, of the military, of the court system, and of the institution of the State itself. These - and many institutions - have been given to us by God as gifts. As we prayed last week: "O Lord, we beseech thee, that the course of this world may be so peaceably ordered by thy governance, that thy Church may joyfully serve thee in all godly quietness."

Most of the sermons that I preach are about our individual relationship with Jesus Christ. Because that's the whole basis of the Gospel. Jesus died to save the individual. Only individuals are eternal; all human institutions are temporary. Think of our Epistle and our Gospel passage. They are about the individual.

The Epistle passage is about dying to the temporary things of this world; so that we might be raised to eternal life of joy and peace and righteousness in the next. The Gospel tells us that unless our *personal* righteousness soars well beyond every earthly construct of spirituality, we will never see heaven.

But we must never forget this: our personal eternal relationship with Christ must be worked out in the society of other people in this temporary world. We have been given the law to bring us to Christ. We have also been given the institution of marriage and family to bring us to Christ. We have been given the State in order to provide a stable social platform that we might grow in our personal relationship with Christ. And we have been given the institution of the Church. And I would argue that the Church is the only institution that survives the fires in which the new heaven and the new earth are forged. Because the Church is the bride of Christ in this world. And the Church is also the bride of Christ in the next.

So there are two realities on earth and there are two realities in heaven. There is the individual and the corporate. And all temporary human institutions - nay, even more than that - all temporary

physical constructions of this universe are given to teach us these things and to bring us to complete perfection.

And what is that perfection? That we are perfectly united to Christ and with each other in perfect love. You know, that's why the Church teaches the Trinity. Not because it is a piece of clever theology, but because it is *true*.

The Trinity is a confession that we accept what Jesus has taught us about the plurality of the Godhead; there are three persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and these persons are perfectly united in love. That's the eternal reality. And that's his desire for us. We will never lose our distinct individuality, but we will all become one at the marriage of the lamb.

And that's what our lives are all about. We are, in this life, either pressing onwards to that ideal - or we are, like Satan, pursuing our own ideal. Our own narrative. Our own agenda. We have either accepted God's reconciliation or we have refused reconciliation with our Father and – for that matter - with the institutions that he has created. Because God loved the world – the whole world - and not just some – he gave his only begotten Son that all that believe in him should not perish but have eternal life. And he extends the invitation to come to the marriage supper of the lamb - to all men.

And the primary metaphor that God has given the human race to understand what he is doing is the call of institution Israel out of the institution of Egypt. Egypt represents our bondage to sin. The lamb's blood, then, provided the means of protection from death and the means of escape from a world of bondage. Babylon, alas, represents falling back into sin, even after redemption. Likewise, the blood of the Lamb of God delivers us from bondage and death and provides the means of our own exodus from a temporary world to an eternal world of joy and peace and everlasting life. Only a healthy life of prayer and study will keep us from falling into the captivity of Babylon after we have escaped the bondage of Egypt.

And that's the reason that God has placed us into his institutions - of the family and of the State and of the Church – so that we, as individuals, whatever our individual development in our personal relationship with God - are swept along with a new Moses, the very Lamb of God, until we all – Paul says –*come into the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*

Paul says concerning the Jewish historical drama: *Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.* In other words, this has all been laid down by God. It is the story of the pilgrim's progress in his journey to everlasting life. We do not make this pilgrimage alone. We make it in the context of the institutions of God. The family, the State and the Church.

We are not all called to the estate of marriage, the Bible says. But we all have a family. Likewise we all have a country that we belong to. On earth, no institution will ever be perfect. It will sometimes be exceedingly wicked. But the form will always remain. And these institutions will always fulfill God's will, we are told. No matter how corrupt, no matter how wicked becomes the State, for example, its

every action, just as Pharaoh's, will always play into the hands of God for the benefit of those for whom Christ died.

What about the visible Church in this world, will she escape corruption in this life? No, she will not. Families are not what they should be. Marriages are not what they should be. The State is not what it should be. And neither is the Church. But this is also what happened to the people that left Egypt bound for the Promised Land. They never really made it, the author of Hebrews says. They ended in captivity once again in the land of the Chaldees.

Early on, they rebelled. They sinned. In their hearts they *returned* to Egypt. They also did not displace the people of Canaan as they were supposed to. They made bad alliances. They were subjugated, they were conquered. And finally, they were taken to Babylon. And that's where we are as Christians - until Christ returns for us again - working out our own salvation in dysfunctional families, dysfunctional States and dysfunctional Churches. But no matter. Christ commands us to love our families, to love our State and to love our Church - as we make our own way to the Promised land - somewhere between Egypt and Babylon. - *Amen*