

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

October 23, 2011

## **“THE GRACE OF GOD GIVEN YOU”**

In today’s Epistle we find St. Paul taking up his pen to write a long letter to the church at Corinth. Now we sometimes think of the churches to which the apostle wrote as large churches, especially since we know that these churches consisted of all the Christians in any city to which he wrote and that these cities were large, cosmopolitan centers, often at important crossroads of commerce. In fact it was part of St. Paul’s strategy on his missionary journeys to focus on such critical places as Ephesus, Thessalonica, Corinth, Athens, and to plant churches there so that later each could form a center of a group of churches that would grow from them in the surrounding villages and hamlets. But these churches usually started out quite small. St. Paul had founded the Church in Corinth about the year 50 A.D., when he stayed there for eighteen months, and now, some three to five years later as he writes this epistle, the church consisted in all probability of less than fifty members, for they were able to meet in the home of Gaius, one of the wealthier members, who presumably had a house that was fairly spacious. I think it is important for those of us in smaller churches to remember this, for we are apt to get an inferiority complex and think that what we are doing is not all that significant. That is by no means the case.

Though the church at Corinth was not large, its problems were. As Paul takes up his pen he has a long laundry list of issues to deal with ranging from divisions in the church (“I am of Paul. I am of Apollos. I am of Cephas.”) to moral issues regarding fornication to concerns with the celebration of the Lord’s Supper to the doctrinal issue of the resurrection, to name a few. It is interesting that with this whole array of problems the one he dealt with first was that of disunity. But before he gets to that he gives thanks to God for them. Even though they had a whole barrelful of problems to which he would devote concentrated and extended attention throughout the sixteen chapters of this epistle, he begins by giving thanks to God for them. “I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 1:4).

St. John Chrysostom wrote, “Nothing is so dear to God as thankfulness on account of oneself and others.” Our prayers are often full of petitions, and that is natural, but St. Paul gives first place to thanksgiving, not only in this epistle but the others as well. In the verses

immediately preceding our text, in what is really the address of the epistle, where the writer identifies himself and those to whom he is writing (1:1-3), he speaks of those in the church of God at Corinth as “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1:2). Now the Christians there didn’t particularly act like they were sanctified, but that did not prevent the apostle from addressing them as such. To be sanctified meant that they were set apart to God, that they were designated as God’s own and called by him to live lives that reflected their holy calling. It did not mean that they always did, and in that they were not too different from many Christians today. We have a high and holy calling to live and love as God’s people, and even if we do not, that does not cancel out the fact that we are called so to live. It is of their calling that St. Paul wanted to remind the Christians there at the outset of his letter. He wrote that they were “sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints *with all that in every place* call upon the name of the Lord.” They were bound together with Christians in other places in such a way that if they failed to live up to their calling, it reflected upon all. The Church is one. What takes place in one part affects the whole. St. Paul then concluded this ‘address’ section with a Trinitarian blessing: “Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.” As was emphasized in last week’s Epistle, the Church lives in and through the Holy Trinity: one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father of all (Eph. 4:4-6).

Following the address, the formal opening of the letter, the first thing Paul tells them is that he thanks God always for them. Wouldn’t it put a different face on things if before we said anything to anyone about whom we may have legitimate concerns, issues, problems, that we thanked God for them. I don’t mean simply saying that. Really thanking God for them in our hearts is more important than saying it. What that does, what St. Paul did, was to put the problematic issues in the larger context of the love of God for them and the understanding that they have a special gift and calling by God, even if they are not fully living up to it.

St. Paul thanks God for the grace of God which had been given to them by Christ Jesus. All of our concerns with and for the Church should be circumscribed by the understanding of the grace of God, the unmerited mercy of God that has been given to all of us undeserving and sinful men and women in Christ. This puts all of us on a level playing field, as it were. None can approach the other from some high and holy position of self-righteousness. Ours should always be the posture of the Publican, crying out, “Lord, have mercy on me a sinner,” “Kyrie eleison,”

and not that of the Pharisee who would thank God that he was not as other men are. Thanking God for the grace of God given to the Corinthians preceded anything and everything else he had to say to them.

Grace in this context, however, is somewhat broader and includes not simply the forgiveness of God's love in Christ, but various gifts, graces, given by God to the church. Paul mentions that "in everything [they] were enriched by him, in all *utterance* and in all *knowledge*." The gift of speaking well is a gift of God, and in some cases in the early church this included the gift of tongues, which Paul deals with later. That was an unusual and often abused gift in the early Church, but it really was given for the edification of the church. The Corinthians coveted this gift and gloried in it. It was in correcting this mistaken emphasis that the apostle introduced the beloved thirteenth chapter of this Epistle: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, love, I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal" (13:1). Charity is the greatest gift, one concerned with edifying others, with building up the church not drawing attention to oneself.

Knowledge was the other gift in which they abounded. It too was a good thing if used to understand more fully the love of God and to teach others, but that gift too was misunderstood and misused, resulting in people being puffed up, proud. Against the wisdom in which the Greeks exalted (and Corinth, you remember, was part of Greece), Paul said that he gloried in the cross of Jesus Christ. The foolishness of God, he said, is wiser than men, the weakness of God stronger than men (1:25). The Corinthians might have the gift of eloquent speech and a kind of wisdom, but he would remind them that he himself had come among them "not with excellency of speech or wisdom," but bearing the testimony of Christ crucified (2:1). And yet, even though the Corinthians may not always have used the gifts of God rightly, they possessed these gifts of God and that was a sign of God's grace to them, for which the apostle gave thanks.

It was also evidence of the grace of God given them that they had received and embraced the message that Paul preached. This is what he meant when he said, "Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you." It is the Spirit of God that opens our hearts to receive the word of God. Even so among us is it a sign of the grace of God that has been bestowed upon us, that you have received and continue to receive the preaching and teaching of the word of God and respond in faith, faithfulness, and love.

God's wondrous grace had been given to them, Paul wrote, (as it has to us), that they come behind in no gift. They are not lacking any spiritual gift that they need to be what they ought to be, and then Paul adds: "waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." The apostle thus directs their attention not only to the *past* and to the grace of God there received, and to the *present*, to the full sufficiency of the gifts they enjoyed, but to the *future*, to the coming of Jesus Christ. The grace of God that has been poured out for them and upon them (and us) is to prepare them (and us) to live lives of holiness and love so that they may be blameless at the coming of Christ. We are constantly reminded in the creed of the future coming of Jesus Christ, before whom we shall finally stand, as will all men, to give account of how we lived and of the faithfulness with which we responded to and embodied the grace of God given us.

Now there is one more sentence in this paragraph of the Epistle, wherein Paul expresses his thanksgiving, that was not included in today's Epistle, and I am at a loss to understand why. Having reminded his readers of the grace of God given them and of its purpose that they might be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, the apostle adds, "God is faithful, by whom ye were called into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ" (1:9). We do have a high and holy calling, and if we know ourselves well we know how difficult that calling is to fulfill, how weak we often are, and how needful it is to be reminded that we are not on our own, that if we call upon God our Father not to lead us into temptation and to deliver us from evil, he will. We need, therefore, constantly to be reminded not only of our high and holy calling, but of God's ready faithfulness. "My flesh and my heart faileth," said the Psalmist, "but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Let us ever remember and give thanks to God for the grace he has given us. Let us ever strive to be faithful so that we may be blameless before the judgment seat of Christ. And let us ever remember to call upon God who is ever faithful and has called us into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

