

Epiphany IV (Transferred) 2018

Dearly Beloved,

Today we celebrate the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, transferred to this time of year because Easter fell in early spring. It is the characteristic of the old Roman calendar that it was based upon the feasts of Epiphany and Pentecost, and instead of having a continuum of Sundays in ordinary time, as is now the case, there were six Sundays after Epiphany and 24 Sundays after Pentecost, and how many of each were celebrated in any given year depended upon the date of Easter, and relative to that, the date of Septuagesima. Because Septuagesima began in January this year, three Sundays after Epiphany were displaced to now in November.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the texts for this Mass is the mention of our fragility in both the Collect and the Secret, the prayer the priest says to complete the Offertory. The texts of the liturgy teach us how to pray, particularly what to ask for in midst of our trials and difficulties, and so the Secret prayer is provocative, demanding further consideration. The priest prays, “Grant, we beseech Thee, all-powerful God, that the offered gift of this sacrifice may always cleanse our fragility from every evil and fortify it.” The prayer is thought provoking because we do not ask that our fragility be taken away, but that it be cleansed and fortified, and because we find this prayer in the Church’s public prayer, it should shape our own ways of thinking about our moral and spiritual lives.

Our fragility is mostly on display when we do evil things and when evil things happen to us, for evil exposes our weakness and makes us prey to discouragement and despair, the hating of others and of ourselves. Yet it is God’s providence that such fragility remains, while at the same time it is purified and defended by His holiness and power. One way to live out this prayer, then, is to accept our fragility as a good and salvific reality of human life and then to focus on the things that will cleanse and fortify it, namely the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. We see in today’s Gospel that Our Lord rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith; not their lack of prudence, justice, courage or temperance, but their lack of faith. They did not believe that Christ could save them though He was asleep, and by extension they lacked hope and charity also, for they did not think the trial was for their salvation, nor did they suffer it for love of God.

It is of course the case that the principal help to our fragility is the sacraments, for they strengthen our souls and renew the inner man. But it also the case that a priest can only say so many times, go to daily Mass, confess often, before it becomes a string of imperatives rather than a homily. And it is also true that faith, hope and charity are what actually drive us to frequent the sacraments, for we believe that they actually work and so we make us of them even when we don’t see the results we desire. We believe that God will forgive our sins and heal our wounds as He says He does; we hope that they will draw us ever closer to salvation; and we love God such that we wish to be more closely united to Him by means of them.

So, if these virtues are indeed foundational to the Christian life, how do we grow in them? How do we use them to purify and defend us? Much could be said, but two things seem most worth saying. First of all, we must work hard to make them the actual operative principles in our lives. This involves a twofold motion: reading and re-reading the sources of our faith, especially the Gospels and letters of St. Paul, and then reminding ourselves and encouraging one another to live according to the sayings of Our Lord and the Apostles.

We read, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.” If we are denying ourselves and losing our lives for Christ’s sake, then He will bring His words to fulfillment. We read, “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail...For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” The Father loves us and wishes to welcome us into heaven, but we must take care where our heart is, and do what is necessary to put it right with God. And Paul says, “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong.” Fragility is a blessing, that we may learn the power of God.

If we are truly the Lord’s disciples, then we will live by His words, we will fight to maintain a heavenly perspective. Remember that Jesus rebuked the disciples for not having enough faith; they had plenty of prudence: if a boat is sinking and the person who can do something about it is asleep, you wake him up, that is prudent; but their faith was lacking in that they misread his sleep as a threat to their safety and somehow thought that He who had taken such care to choose them, teach them and live with them would allow them to pointlessly perish in a storm.

The second thing we can do to bolster our faith, hope and charity is to accept the darkness that accompanies them. We prefer the exercise of prudence to faith because prudence involves an element of control; if I can control my life, all will turn out well, so we say. But if we live by faith, then God is in control, and that involves risk. Too many Christians leave it there, and live a life of extreme prudence, but with undeveloped faith. The truths of the faith are known by them and rehearsed and even discussed, but they are not really applied to their lives, and this because fear is allowed to prevail. There is a twofold irony here, for it is when we rely upon lesser things and allow ourselves to habitually rest upon the more human virtues that we most expose our fragility and we are most likely to waver in time of adversity. And the truly prudent man knows it is better to be led by the Lord than to lead oneself.

In this context, there is a helpful account taken from the Gospel according to Mark. After the Transfiguration, Jesus, Peter, James and John descend the mountain to find a mess: a huge crowd milling about, the other Apostles in confusion. A man calls out to Our Lord to heal his son, who is possessed by a violent demon who constantly threatens his life by throwing him into fire and water and provoking seizures. Christ says that if the man believes, the cure is possible, and he responds, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief—Credo, Domine; adjuva incredulitatem meam.”

This is a sincere prayer, and can help us to be both realistic and courageous in our embrace of the theological virtues. We do believe, hope and love, otherwise we would not be here. And yet the intensity of those virtues in us is not what it should be. We are like the disciples, tossed about by waves, fearfully crying out. But the Lord is near, and He is acting even when He seems to be sleeping. So instead of slipping back into our worldly prudence, we run forward, led by faith, hope and charity. We are people who believe but doubt, hope but despair, love but are selfish. But we never give into the lower things and instead let God work within us. We consider the examples of the Saints and their continuous witness to the darkness of faith that eventually gives way to light, their testimony that holiness is not about what we do for God but what we allow Him to do within us. As Hebrews says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” And again Isaiah says, “Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the voice of his servant, who walks in darkness and has no light, yet trusts in the name of the Lord and relies upon his God?” The apostle and the prophet both speak of true Christians who walk by faith rather than by sight.

At this Mass, then, in union with the priest’s offering of the bread and wine, let us offer our fragility to the Lord and ask Him to both cleanse and fortify it. Just as His power can change such weak and common things into His glorious and life-giving Body and Blood, so He can assure that we have not labored in vain, He can fill us with the hundredfold He promises to those who suffer for Him, He can make us His Saints. May the same Body and Blood give us the courage to walk by the darkness of faith until our light becomes as the noon-day, in the kingdom of the world to come, in the New Jerusalem.