

“If I must needs glory, I will glory of the things which concern mine infirmities.”
(2 Corinthians 11.30)

Last week, we heard from our lessons reminders of the virtues of humility, repentance, and thankfulness through the lens of St. Paul’s athletic metaphor and the parable of the workers in the vineyard. We heard about the power and the grace of God that is extended to all who may be unworthy to receive it. This week’s lessons are an extension of this theme: where the grace of God can be seen as an important underlying element.

Once again, our Old Testament Lesson is found in Genesis, and we hear the repercussions of the Fall. Mere verses before, Eve and Adam ate the fruit of the tree they had been commanded not to eat and were hiding from the presence of God in the Garden. As a response, God pronounces curses over the serpent, the woman, and the man. The power of Sin has overtaken the created order, and now all must grieve its loss. The curses that God speaks emphasize this point: the serpent is to be the most cursed of the living creatures and will have its head trampled; the woman will endure pain in rearing children and be faced with tensions in marriage; the man will be cut off from the ground and will be forced to labour for what was originally freely-given. Man and woman are told of their mortality – perhaps not something originally designed, but a response to the strained nature of the relationship to God. This is, of course, something we will be reminded about in a short week and a half’s time with Ash Wednesday, where we put on ashes – dust – and are reminded that we are but dust, are reminded of the broken nature of our relationship with God, though simultaneously reminded of the saving grace of our Lord Christ. For Christians, the prophecy of the seed of the woman crushing the head of the serpent is seen as the ***protoevangelion*** – the “first Gospel” – for in this moment, in the midst of this curse, we see a glimmer of the hope we have in the Gospel story: Jesus Christ crushing the powers of Sin and death. Amid this moment of despair – the order of the created world being ruined and cursed – the hope of our Salvation is born. What has been worn down by Sin, God makes new again.

In his desperate attempt to connect with the Corinthian Church, St. Paul echoes this pattern. Paul writes that if he *must* boast to connect with the people of Corinth, then fine, he will boast on his own terms. What he does is boast about generally negative things: “I am a better servant of Christ with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death” (2 Cor. 11.23). He lists that he was shipwrecked, in danger from a variety of things, and tired, cold, and hungry. He is boasting in his weakness (v. 30), for in his weakness is found all the ways that the Lord has provided for him. This, for St. Paul, is a discipline of humility (to compare with last week’s Epistle). By listing off his weaknesses and troubles, he finds the Lord at work. All this makes him sound quite optimistic, to be sure, but he has a point: in order to see how much the Lord has done, he can see where he needed the Lord’s help. In the middle of despair, there is hope.

If we then take these ideas and look at the Parable of the Sower, we can perhaps see the Paul’s thread weaving here, too. Jesus tells the disciples about a farmer who spreads seed on the ground, and the seeds land in four different types of places. 1) A pathway where they were trampled and eaten by birds; 2) On rocky ground where they had no moisture; 3) Among thorns where they lost the competition and got choked out; and 4) Into good soil, where they were plentiful and deeply rooted. “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Luke 8.8).

Upon interpretation of the parable to his disciples, Jesus compares the seeds directly to people who hear the word of God. ¹² *The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and*

be saved. ¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. ¹⁴ And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵ As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”

The location each seed falls, or the readiness of the hearer the Word falls upon, makes a huge difference on who will be deeply rooted by the Word of God. And I don't know about you, but I know that my ability to hear the word shifts from time to time. The impact that it has on me is different depending on the attitude I approach with. If I am stressed, distracted, or swept up in a new TV series, I am essentially among the thorns, they will choke out God's Word. If I have been listening to people who are not believers disparage the Gospel or the Church, I might be like a seed on the walkway and feel trampled. If I am coming to church to hear the word weekly, but then go home and forget about God until next Sunday, I am not much different than a seed that lands on rocky soil. Sometimes, we can be in each of these pockets of soil all in the same day, and each affects our ability to absorb the Word of God with faith and reassurance.

But the Grace of God, which we know surpasses our comprehension, continues to work on us to bring us closer to him, no matter how dense we might be. One person at Bible Study on Friday brought up a great image which is worth sharing. Think of a tree on a boulder, which over decades has found the path to the good soil under the giant rock and has now enveloped the boulder in thick, sturdy roots. This tree might have died on the rock, but now has overcome its original weakness. With God's help, we can all be like this tree. He can grow our roots even if we land on a seemingly insurmountable rock. Like Paul, God can use our weaknesses to bring us closer to him. This requires patience from us. Patience *and* faith to know that he is at work in us and around us. And we can trust God to make the change in us, for everyone can change magnificently if only we allow God to work in us and through us. For he wants to work, he wants to give us deep roots. He wants all of Creation to be returned to the relationship it was created to be in: that all of Creation loves and honours God.

Orthodox priest Seraphim Holland Nicholas says in a homily (as is on the front page of your bulletin), “None of us right now are the wayside because we are at least trying to be Christians. Some of us may be the rock, some may be thorns. God knows, and this will be all revealed in the end. Even if you have very little soil right now, and even if you are choked with thorns and cares, God will help you to become good soil. He will help any man to become good soil. He is no respecter of persons. Any man that desires will be given, freely, God's mercy. So take God's mercy and clasp it to your hearts. Hold on to it and cultivate it, and be good soil, and God will save you.”

We must train ourselves to have faith in God like a runner trains for a race (1 Cor. 9.24f). We must discipline ourselves to be listeners, receivers, and followers of Christ. We must acknowledge and boast how God works in our weakness. We must realize that God works to save us even while all appears lost. But to do all this, we must be patient and trust in him, however much we are able to. For God has the power to transform us if we are willing to let him.

Let us pray that God continues to open our hearts to receive his word, and rightfully put our trust in him. And as we prepare to look ahead to the Cross, may we be humbled and emboldened by the endless gift of Grace given to us through our Lord Jesus Christ.