

That Your Love May Abound

Dear friends and fellow saints, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Last week as we marked the beginning of a new church year, we considered God's Word of assurance to the prophet Jeremiah. Due to his unhappy circumstances he was in need of some strengthening words of encouragement. It was bad enough that he was in Jerusalem, which was then suffering under a prolonged siege by the mighty armies of Babylon; but to make matters worse, he was in prison. He had been placed there by the king of Judah and the other political and religious leaders because they didn't like the message God had given him. What was that message? This: that because of the people's idolatry and sinful rebellion against the Lord, and because of their stubborn refusal to repent and return to him, Jerusalem was going to fall and be destroyed. Those inside the city were doomed. The Lord wanted them to repent and live. Through Jeremiah he had begged them to do so; but they had chosen the way of death. And now they were going to get it.

To Jeremiah it was awfully discouraging. He had hoped that his ministry might turn the people back to the Lord and save them. Instead they locked him up so they wouldn't have to hear him. So, the prophet finds himself in prison, in a city under siege, a city he knows will soon face unspeakable deprivations and total destruction, feeling like a big failure ... yeah, it was pretty bad. Bad enough that Jeremiah was tempted to think that the Lord was revoking his promise to bring the Savior into the world through this his chosen people. I mean, how could he do that if their nation was completely destroyed? It didn't seem possible. But that's not a problem for the Lord. With him all things are possible. He told Jeremiah not to fear. The death of individuals or of whole nations does not stop the Lord from fulfilling his Word. In fact, sometimes it's precisely through the death of nations and of individuals – and of one individual in particular, the Savior Jesus Christ – that God does fulfill his promises. The point being that just as Jeremiah was wrong to doubt the Lord's promise to send the his Son, Jesus, to his chosen people to redeem them, so we too are wrong to doubt that anything can interfere with Christ's second coming when he will return to put a final end to this dying world and replace it with a new and perfect one.

But that was last week. Today in the Epistle reading we have interesting twist. Instead of a Word of God to encourage his saint in prison, we have the Word of God *from* a saint in prison to encourage others and to strengthen their faith. The prisoner is the Apostle Paul, who is awaiting trial in Rome. He's charged with the high crime of preaching Jesus. Of that there is no question that he is guilty. The only question is what the sentence will be. Will he, as in an earlier trial when he was charged with inciting a riot, be released? Or will he be condemned to death? Paul doesn't know. And he really doesn't care. He knows that his present incarceration is serving the Gospel. By it his jailers, soldiers in the imperial guard, the personal protectors of the Emperor, are coming to understand the Christian faith. Some of them are converting. And even those who don't are learning that it's not the dangerous, subversive cult that the enemies of the Church are saying it is. Beyond that, Paul knows that at his trial before the Emperor he will have another opportunity to preach the Gospel to those in power. And for Paul, that's all that matters. He writes, "whether by my life or by my death Christ is proclaimed", and he's happy with that.

Not so happy are the people Paul is writing to, the members of the Christian church at Philippi. They are very much concerned for the man they consider to be their spiritual father,

the beloved evangelist who first brought them the saving message of the Gospel some 15 years earlier. They are hoping and praying for Paul's release. Apparently too they have sent a care package and some funds to help support Paul in this confinement. That's important because back in those days prisoners had to provide their own food, clothes, and other amenities, which is really hard to do when you're chained to a wall in a dungeon. Without people on the outside providing for you, you'd be in a bad way. And thus we hear in today's reading Paul expressing his gratitude for their help, calling them partakers and partners with him in God's grace, his imprisonment, and his defense and confirmation of the Gospel.

But the whole tone and theme of Paul's letter to them is not what you'd expect. Instead of being an impassioned plea for more aid and for them to join him in even more fervent prayer on his behalf, he turns it around. He's completely unconcerned for himself, confident that the Lord will do whatever is best. Paul's concern is for the believers at Philippi. He writes how he is always in prayer *for them*, thanking God with a joyful heart that he brought them to saving faith in Jesus and for keeping them in the same.

His main petition, however, is that they would continue to grow in their Christian faith and virtue. He writes, "It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ." That's a good prayer for the whole church, including ours. And that's the Advent theme I'd like to develop in our time together today.

What I mean is this: Advent is chiefly a penitential season, a time of self-examination and repentance to prepare for the Savior's coming. We hear this coming through loud and clear in today's Old Testament and Gospel readings. Malachi uses the imagery of purification by fire and of highly caustic fuller's soap to describe the kind of cleansing our souls need to prepare to receive the King. The indication is that it's a painful and labor intensive process. So also John the Baptizer in his fiery preaching scorches the ears of those who hear him. He doesn't just point out the sins of the smug and self-secure, he rubs their noses in it. He wants them to be terrified of God's wrath on account of their sins. He wants them to feel all unclean, diseased, and icky inside so that they will long for cleansing that only Christ can give. And this is what we too are to experience. We are called to do a careful investigation of the sin that fills our hearts and that overflows into the evil we do and say. We are called to fear God's righteous anger, to hate the way we are, to sincerely repent, and to receive the forgiveness Christ earned for us by his death on the cross.

But that is not an end in itself. And this is where we sometimes get hung up. We focus all our attention on the negative, the "what's wrong with me". We get caught up in the endless cycle of I sin, I repent, I get forgiven; I sin, I repent, I get forgiven. It's as if the sin in our lives is chronic disease we are trying to learn how to manage or cope with. It can't be cured, so the best we can do is to minimize the symptoms and prevent major outbreaks. The goal of the Christian life then becomes to learn how to sin less or at least not as severely.

There's something to be said for that, but again, *it's not the goal.* It's only a step toward it. The real goal, as Paul prayed for the Philippians, is that our love would abound more and more. And when speaking of love in this sense, I don't mean the feelings of affection we have for family and friends. No, I mean love in a biblical sense: the kind of self-sacrificing commitment that Jesus displayed when he gave his life for us on the cross; the kind of love Paul displayed when he subjected himself to beatings, imprisonments, and other hazards in order to get the Gospel to those who hadn't heard it; the kind of patient, kind, gentle, and forgiving love

that we are called to display in our dealings with each other and with all people; the kind of love that says, “I don’t care about me. I’m not important. What can I do for *you?*”

The Christian life is not just a battle against sin. It’s the struggle to grow toward producing ever more of the good fruit of love. And we need to see it that way for couple of reasons. First, so that we will become ever more dissatisfied with our present condition. With love as the goal, the bar is set a whole lot higher than simply not sinning; and we can see how miserably far we fall short of it. That will help reveal the full extent of our sin, and help lead us to more honest and thorough repentance. Secondly, with true biblical love as the goal, we will see that we are incapable of generating it in ourselves. Like faith that trusts in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and receives his forgiveness, love is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit who comes to us as the Word of Christ is proclaimed, which is why Paul ties our growth in love to our increasing spiritual knowledge and discernment. The more we learn of Christ, the more we spend time in his Holy Word and meditating upon it, the more the Spirit works in us the gifts of faith and love.

And this growth in love we are to experience is also a promise of God; a promise that he calls us to believe. And we can and should believe it for with him all things are possible. Therefore as we prepare to receive our King this Advent, let us join our prayers with Paul’s, that the Lord would cause our love to abound more and more. Let’s focus not just on what should *not* be in our lives but also on what *should* be. Let’s press on toward the goal knowing that our Lord Jesus will complete the work he began in us when he comes again in glory. Let’s prepare ourselves for his coming by subjecting ourselves to his ongoing work in us in order that we will be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory of God. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!