



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity - September 12, 2021

"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."

St. Matthew 6:24 (KJV)

A freshly minted Anglican priest spent the first four days in his new pastoral charge making personal visits to each of the members and inviting them to come to his first service. However, come Sunday, the church was all but empty. Accordingly, the young priest placed a notice in the local newspaper stating that because the parish church was dead, it was everyone's duty to give it a decent Christian burial. The funeral, the notice said, would be held "next Sunday afternoon".

Morbidly curious, a large crowd turned out on the following Sunday for the "funeral". In front of the pulpit, everyone saw a closed coffin smothered in flowers. After the priest delivered the eulogy, he opened the coffin and invited the congregation to come forward and pay their final respects to their "dead church". Filled with curiosity as to what would represent the corpse of a "dead church", all the people eagerly lined up to look in the coffin. Each "mourner" peeped into the coffin and then quickly turned away with a guilty, sheepish look - for in the coffin, tilted at the correct angle, **was a large mirror.**



In the Book of Joshua, Chapter 24, Joshua has assembled the leaders and tribes of Israel to say farewell. Joshua reminds them of all the wonderful things God has done for them to bring them to – and to establish them in – “The Promised Land”. Joshua then urges the Israelites, in return, to fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness, by throwing away all the gods their forefathers had worshipped. Finally, Joshua admonishes them (verse 15):

“But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

In response, the people acknowledge all that God has done for them and they vow that from henceforth they will serve the Lord. But the people are only paying lip service to Joshua. He knows it and tells them as much (verses 19-20):

“You are not able to serve the Lord. He is a holy God; He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, He will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after He has been good to you.”



Now, Joshua spoke those words to the people of Israel about 3,300 years ago, but he could just as easily have spoken them to many of us in Jesus Christ’s “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church” today. For, at times, we, too, have shown an alarming tendency to worship

other Gods. More to the point, we seem intent on approaching our daily lives in a worldly – rather than a “Christ-like” – fashion.

- ☞ **It seems that it has become more important to spend our time pandering to what the world wants.**
- ☞ **It seems that it has become more important to be politically correct than to speak Almighty God’s truth.**
- ☞ **It seems that it has become more important to spend our time and resources in worldly pursuits rather than communing with and serving Almighty God.**
- ☞ **And it seems that it has become more important to treat our missions and parishes like businesses or “ecclesiastical social clubs” rather than houses of worship of Almighty God.**

I’m here to say today that if the slumbering Church of God continues its present course (because The Church is the “New Israel”), it will reap the sort of disaster about which Joshua warned the nation of Israel. For if we who purport to comprise the Body of Christ are not about the business of offering something different to starving and desperate people than what the world offers, then:

- ☠ **we WILL relegate ourselves to a position of redundancy;**
- ☠ **we WILL become meaningless; and**
- ☠ **we WILL eventually die.**



It is interesting to note that in only five of the Collects for the entire Christian Year is the Church specifically mentioned, and it is always referred to as “Thy Church”. Simply put, then, the Church **is not ours** but His (that is, Almighty God’s). The Church of God is founded upon His authority and made holy by His Spirit, and, in faith, takes its “marching orders” from its Head – His Son, Jesus Christ; moreover, it

trusts that the promise our Lord Jesus made to us, as part of His “Great Commission” (St. Matthew 28:20b) will be kept **eternally**:

“Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

Thus, we pray in today’s Collect for the “**perpetual mercy**” of God; for God’s perpetual mercy is required for the safe keeping of His Church because **perpetual danger** threatens it. Furthermore, on page 75 of the Book of Common Prayer (during the “Invitation to the Intercession”, part of “The Order for the Administration of Holy Communion”), the priest bids the congregation to pray:

“...for the whole state of Christ’s Church militant here in earth.”

We say that the Church IN earth is “Militant” (as opposed to the Church IN heaven which is “Triumphant”, or the Church IN paradise which is “Expectant”), because Christ’s Church IN “The World” is continually engaged in **perpetual warfare** with:

- ☹ **the devil; and**
- ☹ **his fallen angels and demons; and**
- ☹ **the wicked men and women who work his evil will,**

until the coming “Day of the Lord”, when Jesus Christ shall appear a second time in “great glory” to judge the world.



God’s mercy – which alone can protect His Church – is the same mercy given by the Cross of Calvary (which, incidentally, is also unceasingly shown when we accept Jesus Christ’s sacrifice or propitiation for our sins). In the words of today’s Epistle Lesson (Galatians 6:11-18), The Church – like St. Paul himself – must,

therefore, bear in its body (as attested in verse 17b):

“... the marks of the Lord Jesus.”

Please note: the Church can never be made strong, holy, and faithful by its:

- ☞ **sheer numbers; or**
- ☞ **political influence; or**
- ☞ **wealth.**

Rather, the Church is made strong, holy, and faithful only when its clergy and laity together (like St. Paul in verse 14) can proclaim:

“But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.”

For, as I alluded to earlier, the crucified Christ is the “Head” of His Body, The Church. Furthermore, the central act of worship of His Church is the celebration of Holy Communion, by which we (as boldly declared by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:26b):

“... proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.”

Finally, in today’s Collect, we acknowledge that without God’s grace we cannot stand; hence, we humbly petition that He:

“... keep us ever by thy help from all things hurtful, and lead us to all things profitable to our salvation...”



On top of all this, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ also warn us (in verse 24 of today's Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 6) that:

"No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon."

In other words, we are entirely dependent upon the grace of God because we need His grace to protect us from harm caused by love of "the world the flesh and the devil" (or of "Mammon", if you will), and to lead us to all that is good.

Trusting in God alone, then, we, as Christ's followers, are called by Jesus (verse 6:33a) to:

"...seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness..."

And, in return, Jesus assures us (verse 33b) that we will receive His manifold and abundant blessings and comfort:

"...and all these things shall be added unto you."



In the meantime, while we are "IN earth", our Christian duty and service (which has not changed one iota in 2,000 years, by the way), must be one of:

- ♥ **continual love;**
- ♥ **constant purity; and**
- ♥ **singleness of heart.**

That is why it is essential that we stay "plugged in" to the Source of Life of Light and of Love through:

- ✞ regular worship;
- ✞ daily prayer;
- ✞ reading Holy Scripture; and
- ✞ fellowship with God's people

As St. Luke took pains to note (2,000 years ago, no less!) – for all who would come after him – “The Recipe for Spiritual Health” (Acts 2:42):

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

Accordingly, may we resolve to “seek first the kingdom of heaven” in (and for) our lives by persistently:

“... (glorifying) in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom the world is crucified unto (us), and (we) unto the world.”



You know, I really can't imagine choosing “Mammon” over God.

Or to put it another way:

✞ **Choosing eternal damnation and death over everlasting forgiveness and life.**

This day, this “Fifteenth Sunday After Trinity”, therefore, I'm echoing Joshua's sentiments by imploring everyone who reads these words to:

“... choose this day Whom you will serve...”

But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.



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