**Sermon Lent 3C**

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**Text:** *For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. (Psalm 5:4-8)*

My fellow redeemed in Christ, we continue our Lenten odyssey through the Psalms. Our Introit for today reads as follows: “For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man. But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me.” (Ps 5:4-8)

Now, let me say that this Psalm came to me as something of a curve ball during the Lenten season – considering that the focus is on penitence, in other words, on self-reproachment rather than imprecation of others. Therefore this warrants a deeper look. This genre of Psalms is called “imprecatory.” Many of these invoke curses upon the composer’s enemies; though as we know from the Commandments, wishing someone else harm is beyond the pale of Christianity.

St. James of Jerusalem put it best: With the tongue “we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God”; “My brothers, these things ought not to be so.” (Jas 3:9-10) And earlier: “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” (1:20-21)

One hears echoes of our Lord’s Beatitudes, in which he said, and declared it to be so: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” (Matt 5:5-6) Meekness is the antonym of self-confidence: that is, confidence in one’s own righteousness. We are to hunger and thirst for righteousness. That fact gives the lie to anyone who thinks more highly of him- or herself than is warranted. The temptation is there to read a Psalm like this and boast, “Yes, I am righteous. The sinner is the other person.” Well, what does it say about boasting? We have implicated – and imprecated – ourselves!

As is now clear, we will only scratch the surface of this Psalm. Perhaps you are by now familiar with my three rules for reading the Old Testament (location, location, location). To these I would add one from Rev. Jonathan Fisk: one of the great Confessors of our age. He once advised, when reading the Psalms in particular, to replace the word “righteousness” with the name of “Jesus.” Let’s try it. “Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies: make your way *right* before me.” (Ps 5:8) Christian righteousness is an imputed righteousness.

The great Calvinist preacher Charles Spurgeon, known for his fire-and-brimstone sermons properly balanced with British wit and roaring sense of humour, said something to this effect: Whenever someone insults me, I do not despise but thank him; for he has paid me a better compliment than I could honestly give myself. Is this not the case. The Law is but a mirror bright / To bring the inbred sin to light / That lurks within our nature.

Now, if I may wander from the beaten path a little while we are engaged in self-examination. Much to the surprise of many who read the Church Fathers, those men often quote the composers of the Psalms as “prophets.” I am not among those who believe that God removed the charism of prophecy completely from His Church on earth, even down to our own day. That said, the term must be applied very sparingly. Bl. Dr. Martin Luther was one such prophet. Closer to our own day, the Roman Catholic bishop Ven. Fulton Sheen served both functions of prophet: as a foreteller of events to come; and as a “forth-teller,” speaking to current events.

While speaking on the topic of warfare, Bishop Sheen did not mince his words. He illustrated that, when Christ Jesus said that he came not to bring peace but a sword, that sword is not pointed toward our neighbour. No. The Christian sword is pointed inward at the place we know for certain sin exists. Sheen also teaches us about the Ten Commandments:

All sins against truth are forbidden, like lying, boasting, defaming character, injuring another’s good name, rash judgment, falsely accusing others, denying our faith even under persecution, hypocrisy, plus resolving to do something evil even when we are unable to carry it out. One can commit murder in thought though the thought never passes into act … You see, our blessed Lord does not wait until a thought passes into act. He’s not interested just in hygiene; He keeps clean all the motivations of action. If all of the little rivers that run into the ocean are kept clean, then the ocean itself will be kept clean.

“Love… does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Cor 13:4-7) By “believes all things,” obviously, St. Paul excludes believing outright lies – or even likely rumours – about people whom we for any reason are predisposed not to like. Imagine for a moment if that were you or someone you love being slandered and defamed, and the uneasy world rushed in. Do unto others…

This leaves us in a fairly tight position, though, does it not? Bishop Sheen, echoing Jesus’ words, reminds us often Pharisaical believers to “first clean the outside of the cup and the plate, then the outside also may be clean.” (Matt 23:26) And would you know it, Sheen almost got it right. This cleanliness does not come from ethical concerns or conscientious choices; again, God is “not interested in hygiene.” We do not become righteous through our own striving, and certainly not any pretense to have done better than another. Who are you to judge your neighbour?

Christian righteousness is imputed righteousness. That is, it is not our own; it is won and delivered to us through the blood of Jesus Christ, our Lord, funneled down through the in the Sacrament of the Altar. And in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism we are transported beyond all borders into the very tomb where Jesus lay. Yes, even into hell itself where He descended, showing His resurrected body to the true enemy: Satan, all the worldly “authorities” including our own; and the most pernicious enemy, our sinful self, is nowhere to be found. It hangs lifeless on the cross. Only a new man daily emerges from the tomb with Christ, flaunting His victory – not ours – over the evil powers, and making our way “straight” to heaven where He sits at God’s right hand.

It is in this confidence, and nothing else, that we dare to pray alongside the Psalmist: “But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love –” another synonym for Christ! – “will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple –” Christ again! “in the fear of you.” (Ps 5:7) And let us close in this way: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Gal 6:14)