

Isaiah 55: 1-9
Psalm 63: 1-8
I Corinthians 10: 1-13
St. Luke 13: 1-9

Lent III 2022.

“Now these things are warnings to us, not to desire evil as they did.”

I Corinthians 10: 6

At one time or another, all of us have likely been in the position that we need to point out a problem to another person, but we know that other person (or group of people) will be touchy about it... We're a little wary about how to bring this up – without getting our heads bitten off!...

The apostle Paul was in this kind of position... Although Paul had started the congregation in the city of Corinth, his relationship with the Corinthians was kind of uneven. There are times when Paul has to assert his authority, even when the Corinthians don't like it:

I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come I will not spare them (II Corinthians 13: 2).

Paul has to assert his leadership authority upon the Corinthians. There's sexual immorality (one member of the congregation is sleeping with his step-mother, I Corinthians 5), confusion about the resurrection (I Corinthians 15), carelessness about the administration of the Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11), and so on. Before challenging the Corinthian Christians because there is quarreling and division in the congregation (chapter 1), Paul goes out of his way to complement them when he can, before rebuking them about their petty divisions...

Today's appointed second reading is from First Corinthians, chapter 10. This is another time when Paul has to write firmly to the congregation... Paul likely knows this message might not get a warm reception. Paul wants them to change their behaviour, for their own good... Paul addresses 4 points of concern for the congregation: Idolatry; immorality; testing the Lord; and grumbling. Idolatry; immorality; testing the Lord; and grumbling...

Let's consider Paul's points... As we do this, let's bear in mind that although these were issues in a Christian congregation long ago, it's part of the canon of holy scripture. These human writings are God-inspired. They are intended not just for *one* culture, but for all; not for just *one* time, but for all time... So we can take this message to be not just a historical record, but a God-inspired caution for every Christian – including me, and you...

To begin, Paul warns the Corinthians about the sin of idolatry: “Do not become idolaters as some of [our ancestors] were (v. 7)...”

Now, when we read about “idolatry,” what often comes to our mind first is little statues of wood or stone which we can find in museums. Certainly those items were idols – objects of worship...

The trouble is, we might think that these little carvings are the *only* idols in the world. In fact, for Christians and Jews, “idols” need to be seen as something much wider...

An “idol” doesn’t have to be an item of wood or stone. An idol is any thing which we give devotion to, instead of devoting all our hearts to the living God...

There are many beautiful things in the world – nature; our homes; our families; our hobbies; sex; music; leaders of our social group; technology; and so on... God has created this world, and at the end of creation, he observed, “And it was very good...” Interesting things, or beautiful things, are not idols in themselves... The problem is when we give *too much* interest or *too much* devotion to something *under* God, rather than God himself... It is God alone who is worthy of our final allegiances... The first of the Ten Commandments is, “You shall have no other gods before me...”

Paul was writing in a culture not unlike our own – Corinth was cosmopolitan city, with lots of people believing lots of different things. But Paul knows that for the followers of Jesus Christ, it is God alone to whom we must worship. Anything less is a poor substitute. An idol of any kind inevitably distracts us from life – ultimately, to death...

We don’t know exactly which idols the Corinthians were worshipping, but we get the idea. The final focus in some of their hearts wasn’t the Living God whom we worship through Jesus Christ; instead, there were poor substitutes... Paul’s admonition invites you and me to reflect a little this Lent: What do we treasure above *all else*?...

If we’re hesitating and not answering “the Lord” right away, then we might be having an issue with idolatry that we need to address, for our spiritual well-being... Other beautiful things – our families, our jobs, or whatever – are wonderful *secondary* values... But they come under the umbrella of God, who is the beginning and end of all things. The Lord Jesus said, “Seek *first* the kingdom of God, and his righteousness. And all these things shall be yours as well...”

The second warning Paul gives is of “immorality...” “We must not indulge in immorality,” he writes... In a culture today which is obsessed about *sex*, that’s where many of us go first in our minds... It’s true that the standard for sexual intimacy for Christians is of a higher standard than the world around us. The standard of Canadian

culture today seems to be the low standard that sexual expression be agreeable to the sex partners, and that one partner cannot have “power over” the other, such as the way a parent has power over a child... For us, the gift of sex is higher and much more beautiful: We are invited with God’s help to maintain a faithful marriage relationship, or outside of it, to the ideal of chastity... (If I might briefly add, whether married or not, it is so important that we cultivate enjoying friends...)

Just as we need to see “idols” as broader than little carved images found in museums, we need to see “immorality” as *broader* than sexual expression... Everything that is right or wrong – everything – falls under the umbrella of the moral life...

It is one of the tragic facts of our modern age that some people of faith can be absolutely upright in their sexual conduct, but can abuse their co-workers, flaunt their power, destroy the planet, and waste their money... If it involves “right” and “wrong,” “justice” and “injustice,” then we are facing a moral question... Let’s remember, we are called to a higher moral standard than the world around us... Christianity is not “moralism” – our lives are not trying to behave well to gain God’s love. Instead, bathed in Christ’s love, as recipients of God’s grace, we respond by offering our entire lives to God’s best... Goodness and beauty and truth and justice do not stifle us. Instead, godly values transform us and our communities...

Paul’s first warning is about idolatry. His second addresses “immorality.” Especially during this season of Lent, we’re invited to consider if there is anything in our lives we’re trying to keep to ourselves – trying to hide from God...

Paul’s third warning is not to “put the Lord to the test...” ‘We must not put the Lord to the test,’ Paul writes... We notice that this was a particular temptation that the Lord Jesus himself faced (Luke 4: 12) How does this play out in our lives today?...

“Testing the Lord” is casually assuming that God is on *our side*... “Testing the Lord” is not submitting our wills to our Lord and Saviour. Rather, it’s assuming that God naturally follows Our Agenda...

Here is an example: When European Christian pioneers and settlers began settling in this land, they had very definite views about what they judged best for indigenous peoples. *They* had the gospel! *They* were the civilized ones... This led to the tragic consequences of residential schools and the erosion of indigenous communities, which we are still facing today... If we casually assume that God is “on our side,” we are likely in trouble, because “all have sinned, and fallen short of the glory of God...”

The antidote to “testing the Lord” is genuine humility about ourselves, and carefully and constantly to seek the face of the Lord... Our certainty can never arise from our *own* perspectives. Our certainty is in Jesus Christ alone...

As the Anglican bishops worldwide prepare for the Lambeth Conference, one of the videos is about “curiosity” about the other person. It’s a hard-hitting video which is not easy to watch – but it’s available on the parish Facebook page if you choose to watch it. *Curiosity...* Genuine curiosity in the other person helps us to check our own casual assumptions, and helps us to love the other person more...

In this Lenten season, we are warned not to “test the Lord...” Let’s carefully check our own assumptions and actions...

Lastly, Paul warns the Corinthians about “grumbling...” “We must not grumble,” Paul writes... “Grumbling” is the opposite of having “gratitude,” and grumbling is the opposite of honest, open communication... Grumbling is not gracious or loving; instead, it is secretive and suspicious...

When we read the Book of Exodus in the Bible, we soon realize that when the people of Israel were in the desert following slavery, they weren’t grateful! In fact, they did a lot of grumbling and complaining! They grumbled against the Lord. They grumbled against their leader Moses. If they received one kind of food, they grumbled that they hadn’t gotten a *different* kind of food... By its nature, grumbling is secretive and poisonous...

Christianity is not secretive, but is open to everyone... It is not darkness, but light... If we’re unhappy, do we need to be more generous? If we’re inclined to see only what is *wrong* with the world, do we need to seek beauty and goodness more?...

Especially as the pandemic grinds on, it can be easy to grumble about the health restrictions or to take pot-shots at our political leaders. Let’s consider how we might turn that around, and give grace to one another. How can we encourage and bless one another?...

Paul’s warnings to Corinth still speak to us today. May God the Holy Spirit give us grace to examine ourselves, and to amend our lives... May we leave behind any idols which might distract us; may we conduct ourselves honourably, in the light; may we not test the Lord nor grumble. In contrast, let us build his kingdom, and give him all the glory.

Amen.