

I Samuel 3: 1-10 (11-20)

Psalms 139: 1-5, 12-17

I Corinthians 6: 12-20

St. John 1: 43-51

Epiphany II 2024.

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?”
I Corinthians 6: 19a

We live in an age when many Canadians are suspicious or skeptical, or even despairing of institutions: Government bureaucrats are not to be trusted (they say). The educational system as a whole (they say) is terrible. There is widespread criticism of the police, and deep suspicion among many Canadians about our legal system...

Among the institutions which are criticized, there are many Canadians who are skeptical of the institution of the Church... The clergy are often thought to be self-serving. The scriptures are presented as being out-of-date. “Tradition” is suspect in this narrative... The moral teachings of Jesus are thought to be worthy of appreciation, but some see the Church as suppressing or squashing the true character of Jesus, beginning with the apostle St. Paul...

These are common misconceptions among Canadians – particularly younger Canadians. Institutions are suspect – especially, the universal Church...

I fully agree that the Church on earth – classically called, the Church Militant – has made plenty of mistakes in our history... We have sometimes made alliances with corrupt secular political powers... There has too often been sexual misconduct... There have been, and are, Christians – or at least, people who say they are Christians – who have sometimes misbehaved in ways which have not honoured Jesus. For all this, we need to come clean, and to repent...

Surely, though, it’s unfair to think that, because some people operating within the Church have been mean people, then to tar everyone with the same brush, and say that *everyone* associated with the Church must be malicious. Surely that’s unfair!... Because there is a report of a bad medical doctor, we don’t say that *all* medical doctors are terrible people. If we have encountered one mechanic who can’t fix our car, that doesn’t mean that *all* mechanics can’t fix our cars...

Now, I happen to know quite a lot of clergy quite well!... I’m not claiming that any of us is perfect. On the whole, though, I encounter a lot of prayer-full, faith-full people, who are seeking to honour Jesus Christ in their lives...

In the same way, I suggest that the Church doesn’t *hide* the identity of Jesus. It’s the other way around – Christians, living their best, *reveal* the identity of Jesus, through the work of the Holy Spirit...

We live in an anti-institutional age... But maybe we need to be a little more generous!... If we come across bad behaviour, let’s address it... But for the very many decent people, let’s appreciate what they have to offer us...

The Christian sacrament of Holy Baptism has been part of the Church's life from the beginning. The instruction to baptize candidates in the Name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit was instructed by the Lord Jesus (Matthew 28: 19), and clearly was part of the Church's practices from the very beginning – for example, in the first-century manual for Christians, called the *Didache*...

The early Christians didn't have tape recorders, laptops and iphones, and the early Christians were often suffering persecution! So, it should be no surprise to us that we don't have detailed records in every place where the early Christians lived... But there was a bishop named Ambrose in Rome, who was quite an amazing guy!... Some people are suspicious of Ambrose because, well – he was a Christian leader; a Bishop... In contrast, I suggest that Ambrose has much to show us today, about living as a Christian in a predominantly non-Christian Canadian world. (For example, hearing Ambrose's sermons helped convert St. Augustine of Hippo...)

St. Ambrose wrote about baptism practices, that candidates are to renounce “the world, the flesh and the devil...” “The world, the flesh, and the devil.” St. Ambrose wasn't introducing something new in the 300's. He was reporting about baptisms, which had been part of the Church's life for generations... So, the baptismal vows for candidates to renounce “the world, the flesh and the devil” have been part of the Christian promises for at least nearly 1800 years, and there is strong evidence that these baptismal promises have been part of being a follower of Jesus from the beginning...

Renouncing the “works of the devil” means renouncing all that is spiritually poisonous, which can so easily have an effect on our spirits... Renouncing the world does not mean despising creation – after all, our merciful and generous God has created an amazing natural world. However, Christians *are* to renounce the *values* which many people in this world carry, which are contrary to Christ's kingdom values of love, forgiveness, life and hope, which the risen Lord Jesus has inaugurated... We are to resist values which do not honour God, or respect people...

But let's especially look at the baptismal vow to renounce “the flesh...” What does that mean?...

Well, like the rest of creation, God has created us to have physical bodies... Even our *bodies* are intended to be used to honour God... Many of us are embarrassed by our bodies...: Fuelled especially by Hollywood movies and glossy magazines, we often think we're too short or too tall, or that some body feature is the wrong size.

But God doesn't create junk! Especially young people (but perhaps all of us) need to be reminded that we have been created in the image of God... God's creative Spirit was at work to create life at our very conception; God is the Author of every strand of our DNA...

Some people can be ashamed of what our bodies do, or do not do. Healthy intimacy, however, is a gift from God. God knows all about sex – it is his idea. God's not in heaven, thinking, “My goodness! What on earth are these humans doing...?”

God has given us other natural appetites as well, such as the capacity to enjoy food and drink. He has given us energy to serve him, as well as the life-restoring practice of sleep. All these things involve our bodies – the bodies which have been given us by a loving God...

What, then, does it mean in the baptismal promises, to say we renounce “the flesh?” That kind of sounds like our bodies, doesn't it?...

When we take a moment, we are led to admit that while our bodies are given us by God, we sometimes misuse the gifts we have been given!... Many in the medical community are alarmed that so many of us have poor sleep hygiene – we are often over-using our tech devices, and not getting enough sleep. Some of us become over-dependant on caffeine or other drugs in an unhealthy way, to be able to cope with the day...

To be able to enjoy food and drink is a natural appetite, but these can be misused as well... There are people who eat far too little, trying to match their body type to an unnatural form that is on the cover of some magazines, with computer-manipulated images... For more of us, the danger is in the opposite direction, consuming more food than we need, affecting our health, or drinking too much alcohol, or consuming other drugs...

Another example of a gift being misused is the gift of human intimacy – not being faithful to our marriage partners (either in our minds, or by our outward behaviours); or by seeking multiple partners for our own satisfaction in the moment... Like all gifts of God, the gift of human sexuality can be misused...

So, when we repudiate “the flesh” in our baptismal vows, it doesn't mean that we despise our bodies... Yet, we all have areas of weakness. For many of us, these areas where we can be tempted to misuse God's blessings are associated with our bodies. However, we don't want anything – anything – to be left out, but to surrender our whole beings and wills, before the throne of God...

Finally, this leads us to the scriptures appointed for today. Today's second reading is from First Corinthians. In this passage, St. Paul particularly addresses the misuse of some of our bodily appetites. Christians – followers of Jesus Christ; adopted sons and daughters in the fellowship of the Catholic Church, the universal Church – are called to a higher standard; including, the use of our bodily appetites...

St. Paul begins by saying we can do whatever we want, but that doesn't mean everything is a good idea!... First Corinthians 6, 12: “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial...”

Then Paul addressed our appetites for food: “Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach for food.” However, after we die, all this will pass...

Then Paul straightforwardly includes sexual intimacy: “The body is not meant for fornication [that is, sleeping around without the marriage commitment] but for the Lord.”

It seems that some of the Christian men in Corinth were sleeping with prostitutes, because St. Paul addresses this next:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, ‘The two shall be one flesh.’ But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself.

Engaging in prostitution is misusing God’s natural gift of sexuality...

In the Jewish world, the Temple in Jerusalem was thought to be the place where God dwelt. For Christians, we believe we carry the Holy Spirit in our very bodies when we are followers of Jesus. “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?...” Our bodies are “temples” of the Holy Spirit...

Jesus Christ died to set us free, and we’re called into a new way of living... Jesus Christ paid the price. Paul concludes, “For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.”

As Christians, we believe that the natural world is a beautiful place, and we are called to look after it. We have been given bodies, and aren’t supposed to be ashamed of them... For those of us who are married, husbands – be sure to tell your wives that they are beautiful to you... Wives, even if your husband isn’t as handsome as some Hollywood hunk, help your husbands know they’re valued...

If we are in positions of influence for young people, counter the false images of the world’s values. Help them know God has a purpose for them, that they are the amazing result of God’s work, with exactly the right input from their parents...

Let’s not misuse our bodies. Everything – everything – is intended to be surrendered to God, so we can live beautifully for him. As Paul concludes, “For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body...”

Amen.