

Color: Violet

Epistle: Hebrews 9:11ff

Gospel: St John 8:46ff

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, by always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Today, the fifth Sunday of Lent, is Passion Sunday. It has also been called Judica Sunday, from “Judica me, Deus” or “Give sentence with me, O God”, which is taken from the first line of Psalm 43 (BCP, pg. 394). On this day we mark the beginning of two weeks of Passiontide.

As most of you will recall, my sermon last Sunday, which was Laetare or Rose Sunday, dealt briefly about how a man can and needs to discern between any random spirit that may be guiding his will, and the voice of the Holy Ghost, the Comforter. Judging from the discussion that followed after the service in the undercroft, there is much more that needs to be said on that score.

However, we agreed that the Christian soul needs to be in just the right place, the proper state of mind or rather the proper state of grace, to possess the necessary confidence that his will is attuned to the will of God. We affirmed that by becoming absorbed in scripture and by partaking regularly in the sacramental life, the ordinary means of grace, we are better prepared to be receptive to God's call and God's will. In the words of today's Epistle taken from chapter 11 of St Paul's letter to the Hebrews, to purge our conscience

from dead works to serve the living God!

Today's Gospel is taken from St John, chapter 8, and provides a corollary to that all-important process of discernment that we talked about last Sunday.

In today's Gospel, Jesus preaches in the temple, saying that if a man keeps his precepts, he shall never die. It is more than anyone could hope for, to radically alter the face of death from that of a nihilistic bitter end, to the realization that death for us is the passage-way to eternal life. Our soul will never die. Jesus speaks here with the power and authority of One Who Is God. The Greek term for this manner of declaration is *exousia*.

Death, where is thy sting? For the Christian who is living in the state of grace, there is no fear of death, only the joy and anticipation of the life to come.

[pause]

In today's Gospel, Christ also saith, "before Abraham was, I am."

How do we know this is true? God provides the means of grace to hold these mysteries of the Faith in our hearts. St John uses the motif of light and dark to get this concept across to us. I know you are all familiar with the words of the Prologue to the Gospel of John, also known as the Last Gospel. It begins with these words,

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Then "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."

This past week someone gave me a verse of scripture to ponder in my heart: It is written in 1 John 1:5 "...that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all."

As I was about to say, an essential corollary to discerning whether we are

doing our Heavenly Father's will, is this:

Whenever we are about to commit a sin, either by an evil act or omission, our conscience kicks in and tells us not to do it. But suppose we give in and commit that sin, ignoring the inner voice that warns us against sin. Do we broadcast the fact that we've sinned? Not at all. We know that the discovery of that sin or crime, in any society that is half-good, would make us the subject of derision or ridicule. But let's say that, we're nonetheless bound and determined to commit that sin -- then what must we do? The person who has sinned will make every effort to hide his actions from discovery by any who would justly criticize him for his misdoings. He carefully, discretely, hides his sin or crime in the shadows. He is often forced to compound his sin or crime by setting up some elaborate cover-up with false narratives, obfuscations, deflections, and finally false justifications -- anything other than admit the wrongdoing, for that would mean embarrassment or loss of social position or prestige. What is to be done, when, by following our own ungodly path, we fall from grace?

The answer is obvious. If possible, we make restitution to the offended person or persons. First and foremost, however, we ask God to forgive us. We do this by turning to the sacrament of confession, also known as the rite of penance and reconciliation. This sacrament is given to us by God for the very purpose of healing the wounds caused by our iniquity. More of that in a moment.

But, even though we have sinned and we are hiding in the darkness, and by all appearances we are safe from discovery, we must recognize that we are being watched. We've surrounded ourselves with the forces of darkness, who only too gladly assist us in justifying our evil actions. Often we are goaded on, by the very demons assigned to oversee and seek our soul's destruction.

Then there's the rub. God is also watching, and, metaphorically speaking, He weeps for us.

But weren't our sins washed away in baptism? Yes, however, practically speaking, we continue to sin even after we have given ourselves, through the promises we made in baptism and confirmation, body and soul, to God and God alone.

The Emperor Constantine was well aware of this. Because in his role as tyrant he had been responsible for the deaths of millions, Constantine waited until he was near death before allowing himself to be baptized. Once his sins were washed away in and the Spirit, and he was covered in the blood of the Paschal Lamb, he refused to wear the royal purple but instead wore white as a reminder to sin no more; and he refused to act in judgment of others from that point on until his death on 22 May in the year of Our Lord, 337.

And so it is true that all Christians are expected to be in a state of grace when they receive the Body and Blood. There is no shame in remaining in our pew or appearing at the rail only to receive a healing prayer. But if we should dare to present ourselves for communion after knowingly having committed a grave or mortal sin, one of the capital sins of wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, or gluttony, or their derivatives such as fornication, theft, and murder, which are legion, and we are unrepentant and have not made our confession and restitution, we present ourselves at the communion rail at our own peril. St Paul's letter to the Hebrews tell us that "if we sin willfully after having the knowledge of the truth, there is now left no sacrifice for sins" (Hebrews 10:26).

Although indeed, in all fairness and justice, God knows that not one of us is worthy to receive Him in the Eucharistic Feast, so truly from his mercy seat he says the word that releases us from demonic bondage and our souls are

healed. Indeed, if we are contrite and beg His forgiveness, as St John tells us from the Isle of Patmos in the Book of Revelation, God will look past our former sins and see us in a pure, immaculate state. It is for that reason that every communion is prefaced by a general confession followed by a general absolution.

How do we atone for these post-Baptismal sins? How do we become worthy again? How can we return to that unspeakably wonderful state of grace which marked the instant of our baptism?

God has offered us the *sacramental means*. During much of our lifetime the ordinary means is the sacrament of confession (penance, and absolution, a/k/a the sacrament of reconciliation) that, if made truthfully, honestly, and sincerely, will always return us to the wonderful state of grace. After a good confession, receiving communion will further heal our wounded souls and give us the strength we sorely need to fight the snares of our adversary, the devil. (For more insights, read C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*.)

Whenever we fall short through sin, we must hastily return to a graced state. And the more time we habitually remain in that state of grace, the more innocent we will become in God's sight and the easier it is for us to fulfill our true purpose, which, simply put, is to love and serve Him all the days of our life. And then, on one bright sunny day soon enough, when providentially, we are able to make a good death (we earnestly pray) hopefully assisted by our parish priest who brings us the sacrament of extreme unction. Although we may die and our body decompose, that certainly will not be our end. Rather, it will issue into a welcome passage for us out of this vale of tears and will lead us to our final destination. That is the passageway to heavenly bliss and our heart's desire, which is complete and everlasting fulfillment, the Beatific

Vision...as our immortal souls will forever gaze upon the very Face of God.  
More than that no man could ever ask!

O Lord, we pray you of your mercy, so to guide us now and at the hour of our death.

All Glory and Honor to the Father, the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, One God,  
now and forever, Amen.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matt. 5:16)