

1st Sunday of Advent

Preached December 3, 2017; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

In our opening prayer or 'collect' we prayed, "Grant your faithful, Almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be made worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom."

In other words, we asked God that we might be pleasing to him by our righteous deeds. This is the prayer of the Church, which reflects the faith of the Church. The Church believes that it is possible for us to please God and the God wants to give us that gift.

Nevertheless, in our 1st reading the prophet declared, *All our good deeds are like polluted rags*. Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, would say, 'Amen' to the prophet and point to the prayer of the Church as evidence that we have denied the Gospel. He would affirm that indeed all our good deeds are as polluted rags in the sight of God and that we can in no way be made 'worthy' to possess the heavenly Kingdom. He would affirm that faith alone, faith that believes that God forgives our sins through the Blood of Christ, enables us to enter into the heavenly Kingdom and be saved; he would declare that this faith is a pure gift of God and that nothing that we can do on our own part can add to it. This is the faith of many Protestants to this very day and very often this is what underlies the emphasis on accepting Jesus Christ as a 'personal Savior'.

Nevertheless, this doctrine of 'faith alone' does not very well fit with what we have heard in today's 2nd reading. St. Paul tells the Corinthians that *they are not lacking in any spiritual gift* and that Jesus Christ himself will keep them *firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of his coming*.

Neither does the doctrine of 'faith alone' agree with the words of the Gospel that we heard over the course of last month: the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, the parable of the talents, and the parable of the separation of the sheep from the goats. It is necessary not merely to have the lamp of faith, but also the oil of good works; it is not enough to have the talent of faith, but it is necessary also to work with it and bring back a profit; it is not enough just to believe in Christ, it is necessary to see and serve him in the least of his brothers. St. John of the Cross wrote, *In the evening of our life, we shall be judged on our love*. (cf. CCC 1022)

What then are we to make of the words of the prophet: *All our good deeds are like polluted rags*? We need to understand what it is that pollutes our good deeds and how it is that our good deeds can be pleasing to God.

Let me use some historical examples from the American Civil War.

Robert E. Lee has been much in the news lately, chiefly for having fought on the wrong side of the war. Now, fighting on the wrong side of a war does not turn a man into a demon; it does not strip Robert E. Lee of his excellence as a general or his otherwise fine human qualities; it does not show that in his own mind his chief intention in fighting was to defend not slavery, but his homeland and his family and the homeland and family of other Virginians. Still, he fought on the wrong side, which means that all that human good found in him was finally ordered to a wrong end, a wrong goal. As a result, on a purely human level, Robert E. Lee's good deeds became like polluted rags, polluted by the wrong goal, polluted by fighting for the wrong cause. He may be a hero, but he is inevitably a tragic hero, a flawed hero, not a saint.

Next, let me take an example from the other side, General William Tecumseh Sherman, who by the way was raised as a Roman Catholic. General Sherman was also a great general and he fought on the right side. Nevertheless, by contemporary standards, at least, he may have been responsible for what we call 'war crimes' in his brutal and destructive march to the sea. Sherman fought on the right side, but he did not fight in the right way, even if the results were effective. If the wrong cause made Lee's good deeds to become polluted rags, the wrong way made Sherman's good deeds to become polluted rags. That doesn't mean, however, that we need to change the name of Sherman County.

Well, Sherman was also noted for declaring 'war is hell' and while there were countless heroes in the Civil War, I don't know if we could find a saint there unless it were a doctor or nurse serving in a field hospital or a chaplain attending to the dying.

Well, what is the point of these examples?

The point is that it is actually important to be 'on the right side', which means it is important that our good deeds be ordered to the right goal. The supreme goal of all human life is God himself and we are rightly ordered to God not by faith alone, but by faith, hope, and charity. Faith makes the goal known to us, while hope and love move us towards the goal in the right way.

So Robert E. Lee we could say exemplifies good deeds without right faith, while Sherman exemplifies right faith without right deeds. Lee works without faith; Sherman faith without works.

We are separated from the right order to God through Jesus Christ either by lack of right faith or by mortal sin: that is when all our other good deeds, no matter how abundant they be, become no more than polluted rags in God's sight.

Nevertheless, having been redeemed by Christ and believing in him, he gives us the grace to live our lives by faith, hope, and charity, and so produce 'righteous deeds' that will be pleasing to him. Faith, hope, and charity, purify, elevate, and transform all the good of our humanity and make our actions pleasing to God.

Yes, we are still sinners, even if we are in the process of sanctification, but there is a world of difference between mortal sin, which corrupts the fundamental order of our soul and pollutes everything else we do, and venial sin, which is like junk lying around the yard; it is not pretty; it does not do us any good; but the inside of the house might still be clean and in good order.

So where are we this Advent? Have our good deeds become polluted rags through a lack of faith or some serious unrepented sin in our life? Is the inside of our house, so to speak, more or less in order, but we are not doing anything to clean up the junk of venial sin lying about the yard? Have we even let some of that junk invade the house? Are we actually collaborating with God's grace and growing in holiness, so that our life is coming ever more fully beneath the reign of Jesus Christ?

God is not a hard and demanding father whose favor we have to win by means of some impossible task of proving ourselves to him; no he is the good Father who loves us unconditionally, but who wants the best for us and so gives us the help we need so that we can grow and respond to his love in a worthy manner. It is actually possible to be pleasing to God.

On Friday, we celebrate the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the woman who was not touched by even the least stain of sin, the woman who was wholly pleasing to God from the first moment of her existence. She is Mary, Full of Grace. She knows the secret to pleasing God and if we turn to her she will teach us that secret.

In the meantime, we need to take to heart the words of her Son, Jesus, we need to be watchful, watchful to preserve the connection to Christ through faith, hope, and charity; watchful to avoid anything that would corrupt these precious gifts of God; watchful to cooperate with his grace and so bring the whole of our life ever more completely beneath the dominion of Jesus Christ, the King. Then we will indeed be run forth to meet him with righteous deeds at his coming.