

Trinity 12, 2020

“Our sufficiency is from God”. (2 Corinthians 3.4ff)

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

The man in this morning’s Gospel was deaf and he also had a speech impediment. In a certain way, his physical disabilities remind us all how insufficient and needy we are as human beings. We are just people – mere mortals. As St. Paul told the Corinthian Christians, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything of ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God”.

We focused on this theme last week through the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Both went into the temple to pray: one, however, spoke to God as though he was in control and ‘good to go’ as we say. The other, did not even lift up his eyes; instead, he prayed, “God be merciful to me a sinner”. The Lord Jesus then finished the parable by saying, “I tell you, this man (the Publican) went down to his house justified rather than the other.”

So, the Lord used the tax collector last week, and He is using the deaf man with the speech impediment today, to show us something. What is it? We are not sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God”. To be sufficient is to be or to have ‘enough’. We are not enough in and by ourselves; we are enough, though, in and through Christ.

When we begin to realize this; when we start to believe that this is true, we may have a variety of responses – we all know this very well. For example, we may simply agree that humans do not have all the answers, and leave it at that. That seems to be the response of many today who operate according to the secular mindset. For them, the temporal world as know it and see it, is all that matters. Whatever lies beyond that, if anything, is meaningless. This is viewed as a position of strength; a statement of human intellect and self-sufficiency; but for the Christian it is a sad statement – one of despair because it holds no hope; no eternal possibility.

Another response that is often made once we come to grips with our insufficiency, is to grasp onto God for ‘insurance purposes’. We may think to ourselves, “If this is what I need to believe in order to get to heaven, I’ll do it!” As cheap as it sounds, this is how many Christians enter into the Christian life. It is

contractual – “I will do this for You, God, if you promise to do this for me” – but nevertheless, it is a step of faith. Often, this kind of faith is one-dimensional. It is a thing believed in the mind – a mental assent. God is more of an acquaintance we maintain contact with in order to stay on his good side. We see Him as a Jekyll and Hyde kind-of deity – One Who is unpredictable. On the one hand He may show mercy; on the other, He may send a random punishment our way. In this initial phase of faith, the Person and work of Jesus, the Son of God, is not really understood; nor is the reality of the new life which is ours by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. There is so much more!

A third response involves the internalizing of our faith – allowing it to penetrate our hearts and effect our behaviours and lifestyle. For us as Christians, this is not a work that we attempt alone. It is a gracious work which the Risen Lord offers to do in us by His Spirit. In this phase, we enter into a relationship with our Heavenly Father through His Son, by the Holy Spirit. We realize that the words we have been saying at Church actually have meaning and truth. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, we begin to see our life and our purpose differently. We are here to worship and to glorify God, and to offer Him ourselves, our souls and bodies in thanksgiving for the Love and Mercy He has poured out upon us in His creation and through His work of recreation and salvation by His Son.

In his book, Keep Christianity Weird, Michael Frost says, “When the Spirit renews our minds, all of life becomes an act of worship. That’s because the Spirit not only opens our eyes to see Who Christ really is, but also breaks our hearts to see who we really are. And rather than this being some deathly experience of unending humiliation, seeing ourselves as broken and in need of a Saviour actually liberates us. It frees us from self-aggrandizement and throws us on the mercy of God with gratitude and love. And when that happens, we find within ourselves there’s this growing and nurturing sense of the greatness of God and the beauty of God’s love. All of life becomes charged with the presence of God, and we find ourselves wanting to offer more and more of our lives to God as an act of sacrificial worship”. (pp. 114-115)

These three responses of faith are set forth today because the Gospel – through the man who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech – presents a picture of the human condition and our need for faith – not in some watered-down,

generic, philosophically rendered and politically correct version of God; but in the Living and Almighty One Who has revealed Himself to us as the Holy and Everlasting Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. At the end of his sermon on this Gospel (which he preached in 1522 at Wittenberg, Germany) Martin Luther said, “we must first hear the Word of God and thus, through the intercession of Christ, obtain a faith of our own, and then we come out, confessing this and praising God forever”. (Repeat)

In healing the man in today’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus put His fingers into the man’s ears, and spit (on His finger) and then touched the man’s tongue. This, said Luther, typifies or signifies, the giving of the Word of God. As St. Paul explained to the Church in Rome, “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (10.17). We might all reflect for a minute on this – who delivered the Word of God to you? Who read the Bible to you, as a child? Who spoke this holy Word to you – a parent or grandparent; a school teacher; a Sunday school Teacher; a Minister, Priest or Pastor? And, to whom might you deliver this eternal Word?

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God”. In other words, we must hear the Word of God with our ears – the whole Truth – the Good News of Jesus – His Birth Suffering Death and Resurrection. We must hear it with our ears and then take the Message into our hearts by faith. This second ‘hearing’ – this hearing and believing in the spiritual sense – is the work of the Holy Spirit within us. And, He will use us to assist others.

There is this final thought, as we close: we have considered our need for a personal, living faith; but the man in today’s Gospel also is a picture of the Church, both locally as a Congregation and universally as the whole Body of Christ. What does this Gospel mean for us on these levels?

Well, let’s think just for a minute, about the meaning for the local Church – the Congregation. The gift of faith – faith in the Living and Triune God – is an antidote to fear. The Church has become so enmeshed with the culture in recent years, that she is afraid to proclaim the Word of God – the whole Truth of the Gospel. Tragically and mistakenly, the Church has followed the ways of the world and the preferences of our culture instead of the True Word of God. This has had detrimental effects on shape and content of the Church’s mission on the local level. Local Congregations have felt pressured to soft-pedal the Message

especially in terms of Who God is; the uniqueness of Christ Jesus; the authority of His Word in the Bible; and His intention for Christian marriage and family life.

By faith in the Lord Jesus Christ Who has died and rose again for us – by trusting that He is real and that His love is everlasting – we can move beyond the fear of our culture to share the Hope and Promise of the Gospel with our neighbourhoods and communities. This means that the Church re-takes the traditional Christian disciplines of worship, Prayer, and Bible reading. As Alan Kreider put it, “by embodying a patient hope, trusting in what God has said about the future; by committing ourselves to countercultural communal practices or habits; and by discipling newcomers through a formal process of instruction and worship”.

We are not sufficient of ourselves. Our sufficiency is from God. And, He offers us a living and eternal relationship with Himself through His Son – a relationship that involves Truth and mercy; repentance and forgiveness; healing and new life; a daily and an eternal purpose; and a hope and salvation that will never fade. Let us accept offer and be partakers with Him of this New Covenant.

And now unto God Almighty: the father the Son, and the Holy Ghost...