

Sexagesima Sunday 2020

“The good ground are they which in an honest and good heart, having heard the Word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.” (St. Luke 8. 15)

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

In this morning’s Gospel, Jesus speaks of the Bible as a seed – a seed just like the seeds we will plant in another four months. He gave this metaphor to highlight the incredible potential for life within God’s Word. Many, many people see it as just another book; but its not. Like a seed, it is packed full of new Life. But also like a seed, it will not grow everywhere. The seed of God’s Word seeks a heart of good soil. And, the key component of that good soil is patience.

Of the four types of soil in the parable, the first three failed: when the seed fell on the way-side, the birds gobbled it up. When it fell on the stony ground, it quickly gave way to temptation and withered. The seed that landed in the thorn patch sprouted, but was soon choked out by thorns which represent the cares, riches and pleasures of life. The seed was only fruitful and productive in one area: the good soil. We may all have a visual in our mind of a plot of good soil. I am thinking of Carolyn’s family’s farm on the Scoudouc Road. The soil where the sheep barn used to stand is rich, and the vegetable seeds that were planted in it last summer bore tremendous yields.

It is very sobering to think that these four soil types represent people. Why? Because only one in four is an honest and good heart which keeps the seed with patience. Twenty-five percent, that’s all. The seed is freely offered; the opportunity is available for everyone, but only 25 out of a hundred people will be patient enough to hold onto that precious seed and wait for it to grow.

In some ways that is not surprising, considering the state of the secular Canadian culture in which we live. For most people, the ‘here and now’ is all that matters. Eternity is irrelevant and meaningless; immediate answers and instant

gratification are the ticket. Therefore, the idea of waiting and persevering is a very difficult concept. Nevertheless, it is possible for everyone.

As one scholar noted, “The Greek word for ‘patience’ means ‘to abide under’; (and) it grows only in trial and may be passive, enduring in fruit-bearing.” (REPEAT). I find the literal meaning helpful: “to abide under”. To remain or to stay ‘under’ something, whether it be a time of pain, sickness or uncertainty; or whether it be under the authority or supervision of another person, definitely requires patience. This kind of ‘abiding’ involves suffering – ‘longsuffering’, a word which St. Paul used for patience in speaking of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The opposite of patience is ‘passion’, from the Greek word ‘pathos’. While it carries a connection with suffering, it means ‘strong emotion’, ‘desire’ or ‘affection’. In his famous book, Pilgrim’s Progress, John Bunyan makes a clear distinction between the two. At one point, Christian, the main character in the story, meets two children, each sitting in their own chair: the older was named Passion and the younger, Patience. From Bunyan’s words, adapted for today, here is what Christian saw:

“Passion seemed to be very unsettled and discontented, but Patience was very quiet. Then Christian asked, “What is the reason of Passion’s discontent?” The Interpreter answered, “Their governor wants him to wait for his best things till the beginning of the next year, but he wants to have it all now; but Patience is willing to wait.”

“Then Christian saw someone go to Passion, and take him a bag of treasure, and poured it down at his feet: he immediately took it up, and rejoiced, laughing at Patience and making fun of him. But as I watched, it was not long before he had spent it all, and had nothing left but rags.

“These two lads are figures,” the Interpreter explained to Christian. “Passion represents the people of this world, and Patience the people of the world which is to come; for, as you have seen here, Passion wants everything now, this year, that is to say, in this life; so are the people of this world. They must have all their good things now; they cannot wait till next year, that is, until the next world, for their portion of good. But as you saw, he quickly spent everything, and had nothing left but rags -- and so it will be with all those who are like him, at the end of this world.

“Then Christian said, “Now I see that Patience has the best wisdom because he waits for the best things which will never wear out.”

This is a good place to refer to this morning’s Epistle and the remarkable list of St. Paul’s hardships: five times he was given 39 lashes; three times he was beaten with rods; three times he was shipwrecked – and that’s just the beginning! Throughout his ministry, he was ‘abiding under’ the wrath of the Roman authorities and the hostility of the Jewish religious leaders. And yet, he persevered with patience and kept the seed of God’s holy Word, and produced much fruit for the Lord’s glory. By God’s grace, St. Paul exercised the best wisdom because through all his adversities, he waited for the best things, of the world to come, which will never wear out.

The example of St. Paul’s patience, caused me to really reflect on what it looks like to keep the seed of God’s Word. It seems to me that in order to keep it, I must truly love it. If I am to read it and live by it daily as my source, and *the source* of hope and truth, it must be valuable to me. I read an interesting story about a family who has carefully preserved and handed down a Bible that was printed in 1625. It is only as big as your hand and quite tattered, but still very readable. In addition to the Sacred Text, it contains some helpful commentary, including a description of King David’s family tree; a detailed map of the New Testament world; and a rationale for Holy Baptism. The original binding gone, the front and back covers are tied together by string; but the important point remains: collectively, this family truly values this copy of God’s Word and has patiently kept it for almost 400 years. Think of how many times that Bible has been packed and unpacked in the course of moves and journeys. Imagine how many times it was opened and read. Consider the hands that have held and carried it through all sorts of weather. For me this was a good analogy of how I must love God’s holy Word and keep it in my heart with patience.

St. Paul’s patience in so many hardships, experienced in a violent culture, was extraordinary. There are, however, many watching today who have also had their share of ‘abiding under’ – ‘abiding under’ cancer, or some other debilitating disease, chronic pain, an abusive relationship, childhood trauma, a tragic death in the family, the result of an injustice that has cost dearly, the loss of a job, the break-up of a marriage – any one of these demands faith and endurance. Sure

enough, none of us may come up to the level of St. Paul, but nevertheless there have been trials and testings, and many of you have patiently kept the seed in an honest and good heart. In his sermon to a large Congregation at Trinity Chapel, Brighton, England, Frederick Robertson, who was known and admired as a preacher by Charles Dickens, echoed this point by simply saying, "It is the work of a long life to become a Christian."

True enough: for many, many people it *is* the work of a long life to become a Christian – to really trust the Lord and to become His follower. It is the work of a long life to grasp and to live the new life which God gives us in Baptism by His Holy Spirit. It is the patient, enduring work of a long life to keep the seed of God's Word in an honest and good heart, and to love it and cherish it, week in and week out, so that it can grow and mature and bear fruit.

In his work on Patience, St. Augustine addressed the question, 'Where – where does true patience come from?' Then, as now, there were many who attributed it to the strength of the human will. Augustine had no time for that idea. He called it out as the false patience of human pride. True patience, he said, comes from the Holy Spirit Who has shed abroad and poured into our hearts the Love of God. This is a key point: God's redeeming Love, shown to us by His Son, Jesus Christ, bears all things and endures all things. Therefore, said Augustine, "the greater that holy Charity is in God's children, the more they endure all things for Him Whom they love".

Augustine was speaking of something simple but extremely powerful: he said that the human will can rise to any occasion and endure incredible hardship if it trusts in the love of God. He was emphasizing the personal relationship offered to us by our Heavenly Father through His Son. Trusting in Him – really taking Jesus' hand – enables us to be patient because we believe that He is working out His plan for our lives. Daily, by His Spirit, the Lord Jesus is knocking on the door of our heart, wanting to lead us to a deeper experience of our Heavenly Father's Love.

The Holy Spirit yearns for us to see that the sacrificial Love of God In Christ is life-giving. The Cross testifies that God's Love is different from the world's way of loving. In the Divine Love we have healing, forgiveness and peace. We receive a new identity – new life. Why? Because in this Love, and by this Love, selfishness has been overcome and doubt is swept away. As the song says, "Because He lives,

I can face tomorrow!” That certainty in the victory of God’s Love – that faith in Jesus’ Resurrection – gives room for patience to grow. To repeat Augustine’s words: “the greater that holy Charity is in God’s children, the more they endure all things for Him Whom they love”.

Once again, at least for me, today’s Epistle and Gospel have brought a helpful Word as we continue in this pandemic. The word to persevere and to abide under the restrictions and uncertainties with patience, trusting in the victorious Love of God in Christ. But this word is not all passive: in order for us to be good soil, we need to keep the Word. We need to value it and love it – not as an ornament or family heirloom, but as God’s life-giving Word. We need to cherish it as the authority for our life; for our decisions; for our standard of behaviour.

There are many, many frustrations associated with the pandemic; but with the Lord there is always hope. Like Patience in Pilgrim’s Progress, the Lord can use this present challenge to help us focus on the kingdom of heaven, and to wait for the best things that will never wear out. Let us seek the Spirit’s help to renew our desire for the seed of God’s Word – to accept it; to make room for it in our hearts every day; to read it; to cherish and to obey it’s eternal Truth; let us ask God to help us to be more thankful – to really appreciate His great love for us. If we do, patience will grow and we shall be changed.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost be ascribed all majesty, dominion, power, honour and glory as is most justly due, henceforth and forevermore. Amen.

