

***“As ye have received of us how ye ought to walk, and to please God, so ye would abound more and more.”*** (1 Thessalonians 4.1)

Was there ever a time when either you or your children were in school that an incident of peer pressure became the only thing that kept your attention? We are always striving to be liked and popular, aren't we? Whether that's by making sure we had the newest flashy shoes, the brand-name hula hoop, the food that all the popular kids are eating, or perhaps, today, a cell phone. Our peers influence our decisions because we are social creatures, but as our parents taught us: "if one of your friends jumps off a bridge, will you do it too?". The point of this comment is to engage our critical thinking skills: *should* we jump too? Is it *safe* to jump? If there's water under the bridge, *can* we swim? What underlines it all is the question, should I be doing something because of somebody else?

To answer these kinds of questions, we need something called morals. We need to understand whether something is right or wrong. The ability to make this distinction is a marker of our growth and maturity, and the complexity of an ethical or moral problem that we can handle is expected to grow over time. When we're young, these questions often seem black and white: there is a right answer and there is a wrong answer. But the older we get, the more we notice that there is a lot of grey, too. An overarching question to all of these, then, is where do we get our moral compass? And why do we have them?

Of course we are taught our morals, either by our parents, or by teachers, or other adults we interact with. We are instructed in the norms of our society, and we learn to function within the bounds of those norms. When we stray, that is where we encounter repercussions. It is a system that we are most certainly familiar with, and it is a similar system to that which the Lord God set up for the Israelites after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt in the form of the Ten Commandments and the Law.

To know that we are doing something wrong, there must be a standard by which it is measured. And this has been the pattern for thousands of years. For the people of Israel, God set out a rather strict set of laws and demanded compensation for when they strayed. In this system, the Law told you what you were doing wrong. As St. Paul writes in his Epistle to the Romans (chapter 7), the Law was a good thing, but it also paradoxically caused sin (because without the law, how would you know what a sin was?).

By the time of Jeremiah the prophet, the descendants of Israel were far too comfortable in their sinful ways. They had betrayed the first and greatest commandment (to love God and God alone), and instead had abandoned Yahweh and were worshipping other gods. In the opening to chapter 17, the Lord speaks through Jeremiah to say that the children of Judah's sins were so grave that they were permanently etched into their hearts of stone. And their atonement was to be exiled from their own land and be enslaved by a foreign power. In verses 5 to 8, a contrast is set up between the man who puts his trust in other men and the man who puts his trust in God. The man who trusts in other men is cursed because he turns away from the Lord. "He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land" (Jer. 17.6). The man who trusts in the Lord is blessed and is like a tree who never has to fear because he is firmly rooted next to water and will never cease to bear fruit (Jer. 17.7-8). Nobody can understand the human heart but the Lord, says the prophet, and the Lord uses his knowledge to reward each according to what they deserve. We learn later, as well, that in the New Covenant, instead of Sin being written on hearts of stone, the knowledge and love of God will be on the hearts of all his people (Jer. 31.33). So, choose to follow the ways of the Lord and put your trust *only* in Him, says the prophet (Jer. 17.7).

But even when we choose to follow and trust in the Lord, our connections to the ways of the world still cause for us a stumbling block. Take, for example, the encounter our Lord Jesus has with the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel. Jesus and his followers travel outside of the normal bounds of the Roman province of Judea, and go to Tyre and Sidon – a Gentile community. There they encounter a woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon and begs for Jesus to heal her. The disciples, their judgement shrouded by centuries of cultural disdain for the Canaanites, are quick to dismiss her and encourage Jesus to do so as well. And it even seems that Jesus *does* dismiss her, for he says he has come to find the lost sheep of Israel and asks whether the children's bread should be given to the dogs (Mt. 15.23-26). If not for the response of the woman and the excited response from Jesus, we might be quick to believe that Jesus *intended* to insult and dismiss the woman. But instead, we understand that the woman's persistent faith, in her claiming that she (even as a dog) can benefit from the dropped crumbs off the master's table, showed

to Jesus that this Gentile woman would still be able to acknowledge where the healing grace came from, even if she was not its yet-intended audience. Once again, considering our understanding of Jeremiah, we see a choice by the woman to put her trust in the Lord instead of the ways of man. She may not have really understood what she was saying, she may have been crying from a place of desperation. But her pleas landed on the ears who needed to hear them. She pleaded and appealed to the Lord to be her strength – and he obliges her request (Mt. 15.28).

We see here in this example something that reminds us of our own humanity. How we can be quick to dismiss people whom we label to be “other” than us because of the way we were taught. We can be easily tripped up in our own mission to fully trust in the Lord by the very way we live our lives. We can promise to turn our hearts to God, but our culture, our community, our families, can get in the way. And how do we deal with that?

St. Paul presents for us an example in the Thessalonian Christians. The Church in Thessalonica was young and needed instruction and encouragement. Thessalonica was the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, and was located on an important East-West trade route in the Empire. They had a large population that was heavily influenced by the sailors and traders who came through from across the Empire daily. In such an environment, it is perhaps easily understood that the tiny, brand new, Christian church was struggling to exist in the shadow of the prominent Greco-Roman pantheon of gods and the Imperial Cultus. Paul and Timothy had instructed the Thessalonians about Christian morals and ethics, but perhaps only briefly, for in his letter Paul encourages them to keep on the right path which they were taught. And he latches specifically onto the problem of sexual immorality. Much like in Corinth, which faced some of the same cultural pressures, the people of Thessalonica were used to promiscuity. The Christian church, as Paul writes about in several of his letters, promoted an ethic of monogamous marriage and private life – a concept which would have been completely foreign to these new Christians.

In a system such as this, what would you do if – suddenly – you were being compelled to change and do something new? These Christians would have been the laughingstock of their society, not following the norms, and being unlike their peers. If you or I were suddenly transported to a society where multiple simultaneous marriages was the norm, how would you feel? What would be the pressure to fit in? To take it on another level, imagine being in a situation where everyone in a room except you was wearing a green shirt. Maybe there wasn't a single word spoken about why, but everyone did. As time went on, wouldn't the pressure build up inside you to the point where you felt you *needed* to put on a green shirt too? This was the kind of pressure Paul was trying to appease in the Thessalonians. What makes God happy? Sticking to what God has called you to do, even if that isn't what is intuitive.

These three lessons, while perhaps seeming disconnected in their teaching, weave together for us in the words of the Collect. Specifically the words, “we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves”. Our prayer is an acknowledgement before God that he is the only one who can save us from ourselves, he is the only one in whom we can really trust to keep us safe and bless us to the end of the age. This is a quintessentially-Lenten lesson for us to encounter. Last week we came face-to-face with the nature of temptation: the manifestation of evil in our lives. But this week, we're not too far from that again. We're still talking about what to do when we are faced with temptation, but in this case we are given a choice: do we put our trust in the Lord, or do we put our trust in corrupted humans?

This is a call for us to try to determine what is *really* the will of God. This is a call for *discernment*. How is God speaking to us, how is God calling us to be; to live; to act? Our ability to resist temptation is not an ability that we ourselves really have, but it is an ability that we must entrust to the Lord. It is once again a call to offer up to him our selves, our souls, and bodies. So as we reach for our moral compasses when a decision comes before us, I hope that we may all recognize the work of God, so that our entire lives might be informed by where *he* leads us. As we aim to draw closer to God this Lent, may we be attentive and listen for what God might be saying, may we be *persistent* in our faith, and may we rejoice in the freedom we have from Sin through the triumph of his Son Jesus.

St. Paul writes, “we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more” (1 Thess. 4.1).

May God, who is the source of any power that we have to help ourselves, so empower us with his grace that we may be drawn closer to him and fend off the forces that aim to distract us.

Amen.