

SEXAGESIMA

Beloved in Christ,

We are in the midst of the Season of Septuagesima, a three-week period of transition between the joys of the Christmas cycle, just ended, and the beginning of the great Lenten Fast.

Christmas saw the coming of God into our human flesh – the great mystery of God’s love for us. On the other hand, the whole of the Easter cycle points to the reason for Christ’s advent among men: our fallen condition – the sorrow of sin and death.

During the first week of Septuagesima the Old Testament readings in the Divine Office spoke of the creation of the world and humanity’s first parents, Adam and Eve. Their deliberate disobedience of God’s commands transgressed His divine love towards them. This disobedience, the first and most vicious of all human sins, lost for them sanctifying grace, immortality, and the prevailing balance between right thought and human passions. These were special endowments (in theology called the *praeternatural gifts*) with which they had been endowed at the moment of their creation. Expelled from the Garden of Paradise they and all their offspring passed into the world of suffering and death – the consequence of sin.

During this week of Sexagesima the readings from the Divine Office move forward in the history of salvation. They reveal the pernicious quality and persistence of men in their sin through the account of Noah and the Flood.

God saw that man’s wickedness was great upon the earth and said, “I will destroy man whom I have created.” He said to Noah, “I will establish my covenant with thee and thou shalt enter into the ark.” For forty days and nights rain fell as the ark was lifted by the waters which covered the tallest of mountains. In this chaos of retribution all men were carried away like so much stubble. Only Noah and his companions remained alive. In time God remembered Noah and brought the rains to an end. As we know, Noah released a dove which returned with a fresh olive branch indicating the earth was no longer covered with water. As Noah left the ark God cast a rainbow into the sky, giving it as a sign of His covenant in the reconciliation of man with Himself.

That this story is related to the Paschal Mystery is evident in that the Church reads it again during the Easter Vigil of Holy Saturday night, applying it, in the liturgy, to Our Lord and His Church: “The just wrath of the Creator drowned the guilty world in the vengeful waters of the flood, only Noah being saved in the ark. But then the admirable power of love washed the world in Blood.” It was the wood of the ark which once saved the human race in that distant time. It is now the wood of the Cross which offers salvation to everyone throughout the ages. “Thou alone,” says the Church, speaking of the Cross, “hast been found worthy to be, for this shipwrecked world, the ark which brings safely into port.”

“The open door in the side of the ark by which those entered who were to escape the wrath of the flood and who represent the Church, are a prefiguring of the Mystery of Redemption; for on the Cross, our Lord had His sacred side opened and from this gate of life, went forth the Sacraments of grace, giving true life to souls. Indeed, the blood and water which flowed from thence are symbols of the Eucharist and Baptism.”

Thus, we see that the great Flood is a foreshadowing of the regeneration of our souls by grace, and that the same element – water – is, in a mystical way, is both the destruction of vice and the source of virtue in human life and affairs.

But more important still is that Noah is a figure of Christ since Noah was divinely appointed to father all succeeding generations after an epoch of sin. After surviving the flood Noah became the new father for the human race, an image of human life renewed by the divine will of God.

But now, it is Christ much more than Noah, the true second father of all Mankind in that Jesus peoples the world with a race of believing souls faithful to God. It was through the Word that God made all creation in the beginning, and now it is through the scattering of the seed of that Word – the preaching of the Gospel – that Our Lord brings men to new birth in Him.

This is the very context for the choice of today's Gospel reading, the Parable of the Sower. Our Lord preached on the shore of Galilee, scattering His seed into the hearts of those more or less disposed to hear it. Matthew and Mark, in their accounts of this event, tell us that the different "crops" of such sowing results from the soil into which the seed is tilled. The crop fails when scattered onto rocky ground: hearts, that is, hardened with pride, barren – dried up by self-interest, or full of thorns – enslaved to sensuality. But three sowings produce excellent fruit: these are Christ's truth when sown in souls disposed to receiving the liberating truth of God's revelation. For they will bear fruit: thirty-, sixty-, one hundred-fold, each according to his capacity and divine grace.

In Noah's days men perished because of their unbelief, while the few who did survive were saved by their trust in him – in his word, through his actions. In the same way, in the New Testament, those who trust in the words and works of the Lord Jesus will find their true and everlasting salvation. According to St. Augustine, "just as there were three floors in the ark, so there are three different spiritual harvests" evident in the Parable of the Sower. But the truth of God must be preached in its entirety and accepted without reserve, lest the seed spring up only to wither without fruit.

Hence in today's lengthy Epistle we see Paul refuting the errors of the false teachers while holding up to the Corinthians his own life of suffering as an image and complement of Christ Who alone is grace, truth and salvation. Paul exhorts us to do as he himself has done. This is possible, for God wills our salvation and gives grace sufficient that we might achieve what God wills for us.

And thus, Beloved, through this rich fabric of liturgical worship and scriptural imagery, we are led to further understand the relation of our souls to God. In holy worship and consideration of the mysteries hidden within it we are made more aware of the evil of sin and the desperation of its consequences: they are – as we are painfully aware from life without **out** the walls of a church – they are suffering, sickness, death – the full panoply of human ruin – against which is painted the grace of safe harbor and salvation, the gratuitous mercy of God which He sews into *willing* hearts.

Let us, Beloved, ponder these truths as we prepare our hearts and lives for the coming Lenten Fast. Let us deepen our life of prayer by establishing for ourselves a realistic – but real – rule of life through which our commitment to prayer is established daily, and deepened in practice. Let us ask God, in a spirit of humility and true repentance, for the grace of entering into the yearly atonement soon to begin.

For it is only through a just and commensurate penance that we may come to the threshold of grace and so enter into the glory of the world to come, the hundred-fold harvest, that true destiny for which God has given us life. This is the possession of *Him*, face to face, life in all abundance, even unto the ages of ages. Amen.