

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

In the second reading today, St. Paul speaks about how he came preaching only “**Jesus Christ, and him crucified**” (I Cor 2:2). He did not come “**with sublimity of words or of wisdom**” (I Cor 2:1). An odd statement, unless you know the history of his ministry.

Prior to going to Corinth, St. Paul and his companions went to Athens. There, he used philosophy to speak to the philosophers (mostly Stoics and Epicureans). He tried to lead them logically from what they knew to belief in the Resurrection. He failed miserably! Only a few started to follow Christ because of this ministry. Paul learned that human wisdom was not the answer to the problems of evangelization. When he moved on from Athens to Corinth, he resolved only to preach Christ, showing the power of Christ through the movement of the Holy Spirit and power.

Why is this important for us today? First, because examining the life and ministry of St. Paul – the greatest evangelist in the history of the world, the man who wrote about half of the New Testament, the man who had the responsibility of bringing the Gospel message beyond the Jewish people to the Gentiles (which is most of us) – we see that he made mistakes, he had to learn, he had to hone his ministry. Sometimes we get the impression that St. Paul or other “greats” begin as well as they end – that they knew from the beginning all they had to do. This sense can leave us discouraged, since we often are grasping in the dark, taking a day at a time. When we see that St. Paul had to learn and change, we can have confidence that we have a *chance at greatness*, too (greatness in God’s eyes, I mean). We don’t have to have it all figured out right now, but need only to obey the grace of God in *this* moment, and be ready to learn the lessons He desires to teach us.

Another reason why this failure at Athens is important is that we see that St. Paul stresses that our Faith is not primarily about a system of beliefs, a set of morals, or ritual actions. St. Paul stresses relationship with Jesus. Our Faith *must* be grounded on relationship with Jesus. This is primary. All of the doctrines and dogmas, all of the morality, all of the rites and rituals *flow from* this relationship. If we start with doctrine, our Faith will be sterile. If we begin with morality, it will be an impossible task to live up to as broken people. If we place the rituals first, we end up with only an external religion. This is NOT what God wants or asks for! **God is a lover!** He went to the Cross because He desired to save the lives of His beloved (us) that we might be with Him for all eternity. You’ve heard me say it before: “God wants to marry us!” He is so in love with each of us, individually, personally, that He desires, longs for, craves, yearns for *union with you and me*. Think about a young couple in love, and that love is moving toward marriage. Think of the union they long for with each other – they think about each other all the time, they want to be together, they long for sexual union. This desire in us is a reflection (if you will, a *very faint* reflection) of the deep love and longing God has for union with us. (Note: please don’t take this wrong – God is not looking for a sexual union with us, but sexual union *is a reflection* of the deep longing for union God has for us.) God longs, desires, wants to marry us!

God wants relationship with us, but that relationship can only truly be LOVE if it is free. God will not force you into relationship with Him. He will not force you to go to Heaven. We must *freely choose* to enter into relationship with Almighty God. Can you believe the power God has given us over Him?! He puts out His heart to us and waits eagerly for our response. We can choose to stomp on His Heart and say, “I don’t want you, God.” And as many times as we reject His love, He will still be there, offering His Heart to us, waiting, calling, luring us into relationship with Him. Only when *we* reject Him finally, totally and forever (by choosing Hell) does He retract His Heart.

And so we ask ourselves – Why do I come to Mass? Why am I Catholic? God loves and accepts us where we’re at, whatever the answer to these questions may be. However, He loves us too much to leave us imperfect – He wants us to be truly happy, to be holy. He wants us to be the very-best-version-of-ourselves! This means that if we come to Mass as an “obligation,” He wants to help us grow into relationship. If we are Catholic only because we were raised that way, He wants to help us to fall in love with Him. Wherever we’re at on our Faith journey, God has an even greater plan for us! How do we get there? Pray! We ask God to help us to enter into relationship with Him, or to grow deeper in our relationship with Him. *We give Him permission* to bring us deeper. This day, may you grow in your *relationship* with Almighty God!