

EPIPHANY 3-Be Not Wise in Your Own Conceit

TEXT: ST. JOHN 2:1, Romans 12:16.

“Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much lieth in you, live peaceably with all me.” From a God who came to us to bring us His peace, and comfort and an example of how we are to deal with each other, I bring you greetings in the name of our Lord and Savior, AMEN.

It was clear He had not yet started his ministry. Jesus and His disciples had been invited to a wedding, no doubt for one of His earthly relatives. Weddings were generally nice affairs, a chance to celebrate and forget about the drudgery of every day life. Jewish hospitality at such an event was designed to be a little lavish. This was a special time and like we do today, we want to impress our friends and family and make the day very special for those who were committing themselves to each other. The local Rabbi was there. He would perform the ceremony not unlike we do today. The couple would pledge themselves to God and each other and then of course there would be a great celebration. Good food, singing, dancing to the musical sounds of Saul and his Galileans and of course plenty of wine. No doubt this was a crowd that enjoyed a good wedding because they soon drank up all of the wine the host had provided. Weddings, future prosperity and the host were judged by the quality of the event and too little food or wine did not bode well for the family. The blessed mother was there as well and she brought to her son’s attention that the wine was gone. Our Lord responds in a curious manner “Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour has not yet come.” Curious because it seems as if the Lord is rejecting His mother’s request but without hesitation she instructs the servants to do what ever they are told by Jesus, who in turn has them fill some water jugs. Then of course the miracle takes place and the ruler of the feast, as he is called, tastes the wine and declares it to be better than the first wine they set out.

What is most interesting about this miracle, Jesus first, is the manner in which it is accomplished. Only a few people there knew what had happened, just His disciples, His mother and the servants. This was not the type of miracle that was revealed to a large number of people, as many of His later miracles would be. This miracle was for those who were closest to him, those who were just starting their journey of faith and those who would carry on His work. Jesus wanted to touch the hearts of those who were drawn to Him first and while He was not yet ready to begin His formal ministry, He wanted to make sure that those who were called to be His disciples had the opportunity to grow in their own relationship with Him. The beginning chapters of the Gospel of St. John focus on that developing relationship between our Lord and His disciples. This Gospel, unique among the four, focuses heavily on God’s revelation of His son to us. This is one of the reasons why we so often recommend this as the first study for someone coming to the faith. We must first understand who Christ is, His divinity and His gift to us, before we can really focus on developing a relationship with Him.

Our Lord knew that the hearts of men would be hard. All throughout the Gospels He refers to man’s desire to remain in the darkness and not see the light of His revelation to us. The Jews were expecting a messiah, not one who would bring peace but one who would bring freedom from their Roman oppressors. They didn’t want a messiah carrying an olive branch-they wanted one who carried a sword. As Moses had freed them from the Egyptians, they wanted a great leader who would rain down plagues and God’s fury on those who had enslaved them and treated them so badly.

Then along comes Jesus who preaches to them that they should love their enemies, forgive their trespasses and reach out to them with God’s love. But that flies in the face of our nature. When someone does us wrong, we want to have the satisfaction of seeing them suffer, we want to exact our revenge, repay them eye for an eye. How often are we asked to pray for our enemies, for those who would do us harm, for those who are trying to persecute us. How often do we really do that with all sincerity? The nature of our heart is to reject God’s love because we live in the moment, in our emotions, in our anger failing to see that these are the very things that separate us from God, from His hope, from His salvation.

Listen again what Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans from the New International Version translation. “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low

position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "it is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord. On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Paul warns us against a hardened heart for when our heart is hard, we reject God and His love for us. When we think too highly of ourselves, when we do not reach out to those who need God's love-the poor, the hungry, the afflicted, the poor in spirit, we reject Him. When we seek revenge or glory in the misfortune of others-we reject Him. When we do not seek peace with others, even when it goes against what we feel and when we are convinced we are right, we reject Him. What does it really mean when we say "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?"

But our Lord goes beyond not just returning evil for evil. He wants us to do good to those who persecute us, who are angry with us, who do us wrong, even those who are our sworn enemies and want to do us harm, take our freedoms and indeed take our lives. Even though this is against our human nature, it is God's nature, demonstrated for us on the cross. "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they are doing." If we truly are to be His disciples, to reflect His love, to open up our hearts to all that He is offering us, we are to set aside our human nature and allow His love to shine in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not easy but as Paul tells us, we need to make the effort, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone". If we depend on ourselves, we will fail. When we turn to God, pray for our enemies, pray for those we are separated from, pray for those who persecute us, pray for those who hate us, pray for those who do us harm, then God will bring us His peace and we will glorify God in our efforts.

We also cannot judge others, but we can with God's help express Christ's love for all manner of men. Paul in the second chapter of Romans writes "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things." (Romans 2:1). Returning evil for evil, taking satisfaction in the misfortune of others, not seeking peace, taking joy in someone "getting what they deserve", no matter how insignificant it may seem, does not glorify God. It rejects His message to us and turns us away from Him.

How many have turned away from God, from His church, from the promise of salvation and the hope that we have through our faith in Him because they have seen Christ's love reflected in man's arrogance, our conceit, our self gratification, our vengeance, our hypocrisy, indeed all that is not of God, so visibly displayed in our actions and words. How many reject the good news of Christ because of the evil that is visible in so many who call themselves Christians.

We need to look at our hearts and listen to what our Lord says "Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like unto it, thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself."

Let us demonstrate our love for God in the love we have for each other. Reach out to those who are separated from us, friends, neighbors, colleagues, fellow Christians, all those who we know and do not know who have turned their back on God and us. Let the love of Christ burn bright in our efforts, in our desires, in our setting aside our anger, and in our prayers. As we listen to the words of our invitation today before Holy Communion, "Ye who do earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors..." think of all those we are separated from, ask God's help for reconciliation and pray for them and ourselves that we may do God's will and show the love of Christ in all whom we touch.

May God's peace replace our anger, our emptiness and our separation from those not in our hearts. May God's love be reflected to all those we touch with our lives, and may the Lord bless us in those efforts as we turn to Him for strength in our desire to humble ourselves before Him as we humble ourselves in His love before each other. AMEN