Homily, S. Stephen’s PVD

September 12, 2021

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

If we fast forward 8 to 10 minutes from now,

we will all stand and profess the historic faith of the Church

in the form of the Nicene Creed.

We say it every Sunday,

and I suspect we barely give it a second thought.

And yet, there are some profound truths contained within.

Such a statement may be obvious,

given that the Creed is a statement about belief in God.

But Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury,

provides us with a very astute observation

that we’ve probably never stopped to consider:

namely, that there are only three humans named in Creed:

Jesus, Mary, and Pilate.

That is, Jesus – God Incarnate,

Mary, the one who says “yes” to God,

and Pilate, who ultimately says “no” to God.

Williams posits that we all live between these poles,

towards a deeper “yes” or towards a deeper “no.”

I was reminded of this as I considered today’s readings:

we encounter a similar polarity –

the fullest confession of Jesus’s divinity from Peter –

“you are the Messiah – the Christ” –

juxtaposed with Jesus’s rebuke of Peter,

“Get behind me, Satan!”

And in the Epistle of James,

we are reminded of the force which our tongue or speech carries.

“With it,” James says, “we bless the Lord and Father,

and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.”

We do indeed live in between these two extremes:

from our mouths come forth the full confession of our love of God

and our dependence upon him,

and yet our mouths will also utter words and thoughts

that are hateful, selfish, and a rejection of his ways.

Our tongues are one of our most potent weapons:

In the worldview of our scriptures,

words have the ability to effect what they proclaim.

In other words,

sticks and stones may break my bones,

but angry words might destroy my crops.

To bless or to curse in ancient Israel

was to believe that one’s words had the ability to effect reality.

And of course, our words do effect reality.

Just think about the impact we feel when we are told by someone

“I love you.”

Our whole world and our whole being are upended

in the most wonderful way.

And yet when someone signifies to us their rejection,

our world seems to crumble.

Love and hate.

Acceptance and rejection.

Yes and no.

Two extremes or polarities in which we make our way somehow,

striving to chart the course of our lives.

On one hand, the first lesson we can take away

from our readings this morning is fairly obvious:

be careful about what you say.

Don’t spew hate and vitriol.

Be mindful of the power of your own words,

especially when they are not being formed in love.

Our parents teach us as much.

The Christian is called in every instance

to build up the Body of Christ and to build community

wherever he or she may find themselves.

We build up in love – we do not tear down in hate.

Wherever there is division, wherever there is doubt,

wherever words are cast in an effort to break down and break apart,

God is not there.

Those words cannot be of God.

That is the point James is making in our reading today.

We are to build up in love at all times.

We are meant to make connections and create –

to increase in our charity and our good works.

And yet, as dangerous as our tongues are,

it is the mind is it not that directs our mouths:

our thoughts and our emotions are the thing which drive our words.

And, of course, we are all far from perfect.

We stumble, and sometimes our thoughts take us to places

which have good intentions, but results which are misguided.

Consider Peter in our Gospel reading today:

he makes the fullest confession of Jesus’s identity –

the Messiah, the Living God in our midst –

and yet somehow after that revelation goes on to miss the mark,

and be rebuked by the same Living God.

That is because his notion of glory and honor

do not match up with what Jesus is trying to teach him;

Jesus is showing him that God’s idea of glory and salvation

will look radically different from what he, Peter, expects.

Peter, understandably, is upset, and we are told he has the audacity

to rebuke Jesus.

With the same tongue, he both blesses God and curses him,

James would point out.

Peter is all of us.

We bless God when things are going well,

and sometimes, we fall into the trap of cursing God or our circumstances

when things do not go according to plan.

“That’s not the way it’s supposed to be,”

or “It’s not fair,” we may cry out.

Like Peter, we may rightfully be upset and angry

that the way things turn out are not the way we thought they’d look.

But Jesus shows us that God has a plan and a way

that sometimes cannot be seen at the time.

Even as Jesus explains to Peter the great suffering he must undergo,

Peter could never fathom the joy and hope of the Resurreciton.

And how could he?

It would be impossible to expect that

when he has just been told that Jesus must suffer and die.

But in the end, Peter,

just like you and I,

is called upon to have faith in Jesus and to put his trust in him.

We are asked to put our whole trust in God.

If we didn’t, how else could we be a people who are expected

to bless God at all times, and not curse him?

If we did not have faith and hope,

it would only be natural for us to use our tongues from time to time

to unleash the poison and anger that wells up within us.

But we have hope. We have Christ.

We have a promise from God that even the darkest circumstances

may not be what they seem.

God takes an instrument of death and makes it the sign of our salvation.

Jesus’s own death defeats death and opens the way to eternal life.

As the angel Gabriel says to Mary, “With God, nothing is impossible.”

We’ve been journeying through the Epistle of James for a few weeks now,

and will continue to do so for the next few weeks.

James has a lot to say about how we are to live and behave

in Christian community,

and as Christians in the world.

But today, let us understand that the ability and the will to live that way

does not come from ourselves.

Rather it rests upon the fact that as Christians we have faith and trust

in a God who makes a path when there appears to be no way forward.

We have faith and hope in a God who showed us the extent of his love

for us in Jesus Christ:

Jesus, who did not shrink from enduring the shame and suffering

that he told Peter he must undergo

in order to bring about God’s reign.

It may be hard to see the end game sometimes,

but we are called to trust in God’s vision for the world,

and to embrace self-offering and love and hope

as virtues that will give us life and life to others.

As St. Francis would have us pray,

it is in giving that we receive,

and in dying that we are born to eternal life.

It is that fact that enables us to a be a people who are called

to bless God at all times,

and not curse our neighbor, made in God’s image.

The Psalmist sings,

“I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall ever be in my mouth.”

Our mouths and our tongues are indeed potent and strong.

Words matter – words even have a creative power.

Words effect the thing which they signify.

Hence our devotion and attention at Jesus’s words,

“This is my Body” – “This is my Blood.”

By speaking it he makes it so.

What wonderful and beautiful things are waiting to be spoken into being

by God’s Church?

By you and I?

What blessings wait to be poured out by our tongues?

Will we be creators of beauty or ugliness?

Will we seek God’s glory or our own?

In all that we do or say,

will we lean more toward Mary’s “Yes” or Pilate’s “No?”

May God give us the grace to bless his name always.

Amen.