

Holy Father, holy family (The Pursuit of Holiness)

Song: 362 The glory foretold
 329 You are a chosen people

Reading: 1 Peter 1:1-9, 2:9-10

¹ Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ² who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸ Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹ for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1Peter 1:1-9)

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

We have often remarked that love is blind. That is the love that comes without judgment. So does this mean that when we judge a fault then there cannot be love? That is contractualism. That is an eye for an eye. That is when Jesus said, 'What reward do we have then?' The new framework that needs to be created in us by the Spirit is holding judgment and love together. That is what we do in a family. We judge our children, correcting them, and we love them too. Why can't we do that in God's holy family.

Much has been written on the pursuit of holiness. While all will acknowledge the holiness of the Godhead, yet the pursuit of holiness places demands on the human effort taking its cue from the covenant stipulations of the Old Testament. The whole issue of the covenant and the human response cannot be dealt with here.

One Sunday morning, a pastor got up and told the church that the worst thing that was invented is religion. This statement probably took many people by surprise because they think Christianity is one of the religions, but is it? Perhaps, he wasn't the first to say it. William Temple, an Archbishop of Canterbury, is reported to have said, 'If you have a false idea of God, the more religious you are, the worse it is for you. It were better for you to be an atheist.'

Religions are humanity's attempts to reach God. Sadly, much of the devotees of Christianity work from this premise. Contrary to popular opinions, not all religions are the same. Christianity is unique and distinct. It has never taught humanity to reach out to God. Right from the beginning in Genesis, the thrust of the bible is God is reaching out to humanity. Humanity was created in the image of God. That is God's gift and blessing to us. That is His enabling for us to respond to Him. We are not left on our own to do our best and then hope that what we have done is acceptable to God. Despite the sin of humanity, God chose Abraham and his family so that his blessing may go out to all His creation. We see the way this was worked out in history

through the failures of those He has chosen. This paved the way for the coming of the Son of God to bring to completion the will of the Father to bless humanity.

What many have done is to distort this theme of scripture and replaced that with religion – humanity's attempt to reach out to God. Yet at the same time they continue to preach the coming of Christ to save His people. How inconsistent!

We have been saying that holiness is not what we do, but what has been done to us. And so Peter wrote,

³ ... By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time, (1 Peter 1:3-5)

As a result of what God has done in Jesus Christ and through the Spirit,

⁹ ... you (we) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.
¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Today is the last in this short series of studies on the Holy Father. We cannot talk of the holiness of God without reference to the holiness of His people. As I have said earlier, to think of the holiness of God in abstraction is mere philosophy and it does not lead us to who God is. The holiness of God is the holiness of the Triune persons, Father, Son and Spirit, and His holy people. Theology is not academia or knowledge. Theology has to deal with the reality of God and His presence realised in the church. This is so because 'a doctrine of God which is only a doctrine of God is not a doctrine of God'. God is in the midst of His people.

Thus a Trinitarian theology is not mere academia, but it is in a very important way relevant to our faith and practice. The Father wills the return of His created people. The Son carried out the mission on the cross. What Jesus did on the cross is more than just being our substitute and taking the suffering for us. He has to be incarnated as a human. That is why mankind is created in the image of God and that has not much to do with arms and legs. It made the incarnation possible and for humanity to be part of the Triune communion. And as a human person He did something beyond what we can comprehend. He overcame the powers of evil in His death. How He did it we will not know. He did it for the Father. The Spirit was given to enable us to experience the reality of the divine communion through Jesus Christ. Without the Triune Godhead acting in unison we will be left on our own to do what is humanly possible and that effort cannot reach up to God. That is why holiness is not what we can do, but what is done to us. Herein lies the importance of the Holy Spirit today in the church today.

Is this a holy family? Is the church a holy family? Put in another way. Is the Holy Spirit in the lives of the people who meet here? A church can be formed by an association of people who profess the name of Christ but without the reality of the Holy Spirit within them. That is more common among ethnic churches where the binding force is often not the Holy Spirit within, but the cultural identity and social network. And when that social need is met and the cultural identity no longer relevant, then there is separation and disintegration. The binding force within the community of God's people, if they are truly God's people, is the word of God and the Holy Spirit bringing the reality of the word to them. Without this, the gathering is merely a social one.

It is driven by the committee without the sustaining force of the Spirit of God. Well, the pastor can be the sustaining force, but is that a church?

Last week I pointed out that the gospels did not say much about the doctrine of the cross. It was left to the apostles who had experienced the reality of salvation through the cross to expound the meaning of it. This truth was reinforced to me by my wife – she is really a pretty good theologian. You know that often I fried the dark rice noodles. After I have done it and tasted it, I told her that it was pretty good. She then told me that it not for me to say that it is good. It should be left to those who have tasted it to say so. She doesn't like me claiming credit for myself, and she is theologically correct. It was left to the apostles who had tasted the reality and joy of salvation to expound the truth and reality of it.

So what is left for us who have tasted the goodness and salvation of the Lord? Like so many who came to the food fair and tasted the good food, they wanted the recipe to do the same at home. We are all like that. Having tasted the salvation of the Lord, we want to have the recipe to do the same. No, what is left for us to do is to confess the reality of that salvation to others – a beggar telling another where the good food is to be found. That is why Peter wrote,

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:9)

The proclamation of the mighty acts of God is not merely in words but also in deeds. Yes, we ought to confess that in the church as we meet together. Therefore it is part of our worship. It is not mere recitation, though it can be if we do not have the reality within. The proclamation is also in deeds. Our ministry in Murray Bridge is a proclamation in word and deeds. The trips made to Hope Foster Home in China are proclamations in deeds if not also in word. It is the telling of the 'mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light'. That is the 'chosen race, the royal priesthood and the holy nation'. That is because we have a Holy Father and we are His holy family. So Paul says,

¹⁴ For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Eph. 3:14-17)

He is our Holy Father in so far as His Spirit dwells in our heart. The Holy Father has sent Christ to dwell in our hearts. That is our holiness, holiness in communion. That is when we through the Holy Spirit have taken root in the holy Triune communion. Instead of rooting ourselves this way, what many have done, and it may include us, is that firstly, we try to graft the gospel onto the substrate of our culture hoping that it can root there. That will not take. The cultural substrate cannot support the church. The cultural substrate is the kingdom of this world. It is not the kingdom of God. A mighty human input may carry it along for a while, but what after that? All cultures are fallen cultures and are in need of reforming, and so is our church culture. A strong human personality can support such a cultural institution. But is that the holy family of God?

Secondly, you cannot graft the gospel onto a substrate of self will because the self will is not subordinate to the Holy Father. As we have been taught to pray, 'Thy will be done on heaven as it is on earth'. We cannot decide on what we want to do and then pray the Holy Father to bless it. We need to know the will of the Father in the first place before we move. That is a holy family.

Thirdly, you cannot graft the gospel onto the intelligentsia. Our human intelligence needs to be conquered by the Holy Spirit. We have turned the gospel into a religion of our own making. Much has been written on the pursuit of holiness. Their common thrust is what we can do. Throughout history humankind has been on the wagon of pursuing holiness.

In the early days of the church there had been some who withdrew away from society to pursue holiness. One who is well known is Anthony of Egypt in the third century (251-356). We may call him the father of the monastic movement. He went to live a solitary life in the Egyptian desert at the age of fifteen and it was said that he remained there for the next ninety years. Many others did the same and before long they gathered as a group and hence the rise of monasticism, *mono* meaning one. They felt that holiness is that personal sense of purity without being tarnished by the evil in the world. In their separation from the affairs of the world, they set up rules for their way of life such as the rule of St Benedict, etc. The monastic movement was suppressed in the 16th and 18th century. Today they are viewed as a lofty expression of Christianity. Yet did they forget that the Holy Son of God came into our sinful world and sat down to eat with republicans and sinners?

When religious turmoil took place in Europe in the 1600s, persecuted groups left for the Americas – the Pilgrim Fathers. Pilgrimage became an image for the pursuit of holiness as the writer to the Hebrews said,

¹³ All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, ¹⁴ for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Hebrews 11:13-16)

Like Abraham and Sarah the Pilgrim Fathers felt like ‘strangers’ in their homeland, and sought ‘a better country, a heavenly one’. They seek to further their quest for holiness and hence they earned the title, puritans. However, the puritans were aware that perfection could not be attained to in this life, yet the pilgrimage ‘offered saints a sense of fulfillment and grace received - a sabbath peace brought by the Spirit moving through them’.¹

The awakening in the 1800 roused many to seek a holy life. However the message that was preached ignored the doctrine of predestination which Calvin had so eloquently expounded just few hundred years before. They were taught that their destiny was in their own hands and they could decide to respond to God. That was the path to quick conversion. To quote Moorehead again,

That possibility received new emphasis in the incipient perfectionism of revivalism. If sinners could by their own free will rise from the anxious bench to accept Christ, perhaps they could also subsequently maintain a life of holiness and joy more elevated than most Protestants had previously thought attainable. The way of the Christian pilgrim might proceed over gentler byways than Bunyan had envisioned. This hopeful prospect derived not only from the gradual movement toward Arminianism, but also from the very success of the revivals. Since repeated showers of grace had wrought such wondrous and unprecedented ingatherings of souls, the Spirit might also lead men and women to higher standards of holiness than they had known before.²

The awakening roused the desire of many to seek holiness, well known among them were the Wesley brothers. That began a holiness movement and hence a methodical life. So was born

¹ J Moorhead, The quest for holiness in American Protestantism, *Interpretation*, 53.4 (Oct. 1999), 369.

² Ibid. 370.

Methodism. It was taught that original sin could be got rid of entirely in this life and perfectionism attained if only they would consecrate themselves and surrender to God's will. The Keswick movement is an offshoot of this trend though it subsequently did not go along the path of teaching that perfectionism is attainable in this life.

What they should have done was not to formalise the mode of expression but to allow the free expression of the Spirit in the lives of those so affected. I acknowledge that it is easier said than done. With sinful humanity, there will be problem either way. We live with that.

By the early 1900s, the Spirit's awakening led to the rise of Pentecostalism. Holiness was associated with a new outpouring of the Spirit. Scripture also taught that that is so, but what resulted was the mandatory link between the Spirit's indwelling and the speaking of tongues.

Many of the advocates of these movements were godly people who sought the face of God and I do not doubt that many of the things they taught and did were the result of the indwelling Spirit. I think what went wrong was that they taught the actions (doing) and many were imitators of the actions without the reality within them (being). That was the beginning of the disintegration.

Let us go back a few weeks when we saw what the holiness of God means.

Thus: the holiness which God is *in se* is active in the election and purification of a people for himself, and the love of the triune persons abounds as loving mercy towards ruined creatures.³

The holiness of God is what God did in first choosing and then purifying a people for Himself. It is totally what God did and that is why we pray, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. Let us go back and look at the parable of the vineyard. Most people have problem with this parable because they have approached it from a secular view of fairness and equality.

¹ "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. ² After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. ³ When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; ⁴ and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. ⁵ When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. ⁶ And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' ⁷ They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' ⁸ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' ⁹ When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. ¹⁰ Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. ¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' ¹³ But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?' ¹⁴ Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. ¹⁵ Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' ¹⁶ So the last will be first, and the first will be last." (Matt. 20:1-16)

If we accept the Father's prerogative in predestination, then this parable makes perfect sense. If not we will always struggle with it. Let me explain. I believe that God has given to many others a greater dose of wisdom than me. Now if I were to see myself as a competitor rather than a recipient of that wisdom, then I will never benefit from the flow of God's grace through them because I will always block that flow when I am in my competitive spirit. If I were to see myself as a recipient of that wisdom, then I live in the full blessing of the Father that flows through

³ J Webster, Holiness and Love, *SJT* 57(3): 249–268 (2004)

others. What is so unfair about that? In other ways, the Holy Father has also given more to me than to others. We have blocked the pathway of grace that comes from the Holy Father by our contractual and obligatory way of thinking. We have put ourselves under the bondage of our culture. Freely, freely you have received and so freely, freely give. I do not say that from a utilitarian point of view. Neither do I mean that we could be scroungers. What I am saying is that if the Holy Spirit is within us, then we act from the drive of the Spirit within us. We act from the gifts that the Spirit has given to us and that will flow to others. It is not a matter of weighing up the balance sheets. It is not a matter of 'I have to', but it is a matter of the flow of grace that comes from above to us and through us to others, and eventually it returns in praise to the Father. What a wonderful circle of grace! That paradigm works for all creation. One of the significant theological statements made by Paul is this simple verse with three prepositions – from, through and to.

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:36)

That is why this promise was made to Abraham.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

God's blessing to His creation has come through an intermediary, His chosen vessel. It was not a matter of favouritism, but the working out of the Father's purpose. That purpose as was made known to Abraham was that God's blessing should go out to all His creation. It is because of our sinful mind that we cannot hold it. A holy mind will grab it wholeheartedly. That is the way how things would work out for the Holy Father. When all human vessels fail, then came the only Son of God in human form and through Him we are all blessed. Now that the Son has returned to the Father in heaven, the Spirit gives gifts to us in varied ways so that those gifts, through human instrumentality, can be used for the building up of His people. We are all recipients of those gifts through one another. You have received them through me and I have received them through you. But if we view things competitively then we block that process and become impoverished. We deprived ourselves in the holy family. Don't do that. Live in the flow of God's grace. That is what a holy family is all about.

Prayer

To close this series of studies, let us say the Lord's prayer together.