

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ
Amen.

Our sermon text today is written in Matt 11:16-30

Let us pray ...

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight; we pray through Your son, Jesus Christ.

Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!

Out of all the cities of the ancient world, the three mentioned in the Gospel reading this morning, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, were among the most blessed of God. Many of the mighty works of Jesus were done in them. There Jesus healed the multitudes, including the blind man at the pool, and He fed the 5,000 in Bethsaida as well. In Capernaum He healed the paralytic who was lowered down into His presence through the roof into the living room where Jesus was. In Capernaum He healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law. In Capernaum He walked on the sea, and finally, while still in Capernaum He preached His great sermon on the Bread of Life found in John 6, where he teaches: *I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

And yet, by and large, the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum rejected Jesus and the Gospel He preached. Rather than repent of their sins and turn to God humbly for forgiveness, they went their own way, the way that would ultimately end in death and destruction. In fact, of the three great cities of the ancient world, virtually nothing remains of Chorazin, Bethsaida or Capernaum.

In some ways, these three cities help us to relate better to today's reading, mainly because they were a lot like the towns and cities around our country today. Just like them, we have rejected our Lord's call to repentance and God's grace for more comfortable teachings. Often, we hear people say something along the lines of: "When I think of God, I see a god who loves everyone. I just can't accept a god who judges and condemns people for something as old fashioned as sin. My god wouldn't do that, my god is different."

In other words, we have rejected the call to repentance and God's grace and replaced them with the self-comforting ideologies of permissiveness and tolerance. This of course should come as no surprise; we live in a world that has moved beyond the proper application of reason and wisdom to discover what the truth is. Today we run on emotion and feelings regardless of whether it is right or wrong, and we apply this to the Scriptures as well. And then, when emotion and feelings turns up a variety of different gods, people simply state that god means different things to different people, and any person's concept of god is legitimate for that person.

When such people hear about the one true God, they often refuse to believe in Him because the one true God doesn't match their personal image of god. They fall prey to the false idea that just because they don't like the God of the Bible; that He doesn't exist. As an anonymous philosopher once said, "On the sixth day God created man. On the seventh day, man returned the favor."

This is what John the Baptist and Jesus came up against too. In the reading this morning we heard Jesus' lament; *But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'*

This generation, these 'most blessed' people, reminded Jesus of pouting children sitting in the marketplaces complaining that their playmates won't play their games; so, therefore no one played. To put it in perspective, this generation, these 'most blessed' people would not play the game of the kingdom, because the ones who were bringing in the kingdom did not meet their expectations.

John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

As the Gospels show not too many people took them seriously; although many people were baptized when they heard John's call to repentance (3:5-6) and quite a few were impressed when they heard Jesus teach (4:23-25; 7:28-29), the overall result of both of these ministries would seem to be more of a passing interest rather than permanent change, fascination rather than faith.

This is an important point, notice to whom Jesus and John delivered their respective messages. They were speaking directly to God's privileged people, to the people whom God had called to be His own. The Jews of Jesus' day, particularly those standing right before Him, saw themselves as God's chosen people simply because they had the "right" family tree and they followed the correct teaching - all 613 rabbinic rules and laws of the Torah, to be exact.

According to the religious leaders and teachers, salvation was squarely centered in the keeping of all these rules and laws. This kept you righteous and gave you entry into Heaven. Therefore they rejected Jesus and John's call to repent and believe, and instead chose to rely upon their own self-serving and self-comforting teachings. These people claimed to be wise in the ways of the Lord, but in reality they were no more than hypocrites because their self-imposed doctrines only served to push others away: *"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! [Jesus said] For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in (Mt 23:13).*

In all honesty, I think Jesus would say the same thing to us today. As God's people, which as Christians we are, we like to think that we have learnt from those hypocritical Jews of Jesus time, but have we? How often don't we come to church thinking 'I'm a good Christian, I always come to church, but in reality, we come when it suits us. We read our bibles and go to bible studies ... when it suits us. We pray at home ... when it suits us, we believe what the Bible says ... when it suits us'.

Therefore we are no different than the people of Jesus day; our hypocrisy is no less than theirs, we too believe that we are wise in the ways of the Lord, but like them we too are all born in bondage to sin, it is in us to the core, through and through and there is nothing we can do about it.

In the Epistle reading for this morning, we heard the Apostle Paul lamenting that very same thing in his own life. *I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*

Within the reading we hear that there is a part of St. Paul that delights in God. That part is there because he's a man of faith, faith in Christ, the crucified. But then there's another part of him that wages war against God. It makes him captive to the sin that dwells in him. Paul, like every Christian, was a living contradiction. He was both saint and sinner at the same time. While he wanted to do only one thing, to love and serve God, he often did another. He says, *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* What Paul confesses about himself is systemic. It's something that invades his whole being. This is something he can't understand, much less master, and like him neither can we.

By the end of the Epistle reading St. Paul says he's tired. He's tired of himself, He's tired of the inner conflict, and he's tired of his actions that so often seem to deny God. He says, *wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death?*

His answer, of course, was found in Christ. *Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!* he says. It is Christ Jesus who delivers us from our bodies of death. He does this through faith; a faith that simply clings to God's promise that all people are redeemed in the all-atoning crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone. This saving faith is created by God in the hearing of His Word, it is a gift of the Holy Spirit through the power of the gospel in Word and sacrament; as St. Paul states in Romans: *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of God.* And King David wrote, *Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!* (Ps 34:8).

Our worldly wisdom, our feelings and emotions, with their self-comforting ideologies are hostile toward God's truth and will become an obstacle to faith. But for those of us who acknowledge their sinfulness and realize that it is a burden too heavy for them to bear. Who recognize that this load will drag them to hell if they must bear it by themselves, are the ones to whom Jesus promises rest. Jesus says to them, *take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

The yoke Jesus asks us to take upon ourselves might best be defined as the whole of Christian life; it is the summation of the Scriptures, *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Mt 22:36–40).

Once we have assumed that yoke our lives begin to change, God's commandments will no longer be a heavy burden that weighs us down and destroys us. Instead, they become an expression of God's will in which we delight, and we will begin to look for ways to express our thanks to God for the blessings of his grace.

The crosses we are called upon to bear on account of our loyalty to our Saviour become faith-strengthening experiences. They help us to understand what Christ endured for us, and help us learn to trust our Lord's promise that he will give us the strength to endure the trails of this life here on earth and look forward to the blessings of eternal life with the Father in heaven.

Amen

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen