

OCTOBER 2, 2022

Today's First Reading is a lesson from the Prophet Habakkuk, consisting of two excerpts attached to each other, one from chapter one of Habakkuk, and the other from chapter two.

The first excerpt nicely summarizes what Habakkuk is doing in chapter one. He is complaining to God. The Prophet's Judean homeland is filled with illegal violence and injustice, and God seems to let this go on. Well, maybe not; maybe God is going to punish Judah by sending the Babylonians to smash Jerusalem. That, however, just raises another problem for Habakkuk to complain about. God is proposing to punish the wicked Judeans with the equally wicked Babylonians, a nation that slays other nations.

Chapter two of Habakkuk is God's response to Habakkuk's complaints. God counsels Habakkuk to have patience and faith. Judah will be punished for its sins, and so will Babylon, in due time. In the end, chastised Judah will have a second chance, a new birth from that remnant of Judah that stayed loyal and kept the Faith of Israel. "The just one, because of his Faith, shall live", promises the Lord.

In effect, Habakkuk says to God "The times are bad - what are You going to do about it?" The Lord responds "What are you going to do about it - are you going to keep the Faith?"

In today's second reading from chapter one of St. Paul's Epistle to Timothy, St. Paul tells Timothy, a young man, and remarkably young to be one of the Church's first bishops, "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands, for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self control" When Timothy was made a bishop, St. Paul the Apostle and a gathering of early Elders (the first priests of the Church, the English word "priest" coming from the Greek word for "Elder") laid hands on him and invoked upon him the power of the Holy Spirit. By that Spirit Timothy received the power to do something about the times in which he lived. Timothy received love and self control, and with them that spiritual power we call "Grace". That Grace he received in a particular way through the laying on of hands in what the Church would eventually call Ordination, he had already received in a general way with every other Christian, in what the Church would eventually call Confirmation. Grace is given to all Christians.

The power we call Grace is an awareness of the Presence and will of God. That awareness conquers selfishness, and conquers the times. Grace defeats sin inside us and outside us. Grace gives sure hope of Eternal Life now, and will give the full reality of Eternal Life when the Vision has its time and comes. Grace requires our cooperation. If we are careless and lazy, Grace has no effect in us. If we pay attention and are diligent in our spiritual life, Grace has a powerful effect in us, making us holy, and through us touching a cold world with the warmth of God's loving Presence.

In the early 5th century, say from 410 until his death in 430, the people around St Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in Roman Africa, often had reason to decry the times. In response, St. Augustine once told them "You are the times". The times are what we make them; but it matters hugely whether we are making the times on our own, or with the help of God's Grace. If we try to make ourselves without an awareness of God's Presence and will, we will make a mess of ourselves. If we try to make our times without an awareness of God's Presence and will, we will make a mess of our times. Such an awareness, Grace, is God's gift to us. We can be open to it, and must cooperate with it, but we cannot create it. Only God can make us aware of his Presence and will. Grace is pure gift. With that gift we will become holy. Without Grace we will fail ultimately in all we attempt.

St. Augustine's teaching on Grace is deeply Biblical and Traditional. St. Augustine first presented his teaching on Grace in his marvelous spiritual autobiography, "Confessions". It is simply that to those who learn the humility to open the door of the soul and let God go to work, God will always give Grace, an awareness of His Presence and will that inspires the human will, and empowers it to carry out God's commands.

Since books, being laboriously hand written, were very expensive, the normal way for people to experience a book was to gather in a group, with a skilled person reading the book out loud to the group. During one reading of "Confessions" in Roman Gaul, a Romano-British monk named Pelagius stormed out of the room. For Pelagius, God's original gift of free will was enough, and no extra gift of Grace was required. With hard work and strong discipline, you could make yourself a saint. The heretic Pelagius might well be the "patron saint" of the heresy of self improvement. You can be the master of your own soul, through hard work and strong discipline.

I've been fighting Pelagianism and self improvement ever since my college days. Notice the difference between Pelagius and St. Augustine. Pelagius says all you need is hard work and strong discipline. St. Augustine says all you need is Grace. There is a universe of difference between hard work and discipline and an awareness of God's Presence and will. It isn't as though those who are aware of God's Presence and will don't have work to do, and that work requires discipline; and the monk Pelagius didn't deny that Christians could and should have an awareness of God's Presence and will. The difference is this: Pelagius taught that by hard work and self discipline, you could earn an awareness of God's Presence and will; St. Augustine taught that it goes the other way around. The gift of Grace, the gift of being aware of God's Presence and will, makes hard work and self discipline joy, instead of torture. If Pelagius is the spiritual drill sergeant, St. Augustine is the spiritual physician. Pelagius says "just to it!" St. Augustine says "receive your medicine and nourishment, and then you can do it, and want to do it" Pelagius puts human will power at the center of Salvation. Work for it! St. Augustine puts God's love at the center of Salvation. Receive it! Receive it, and then you can do the work put in front of you, and do it with joy.

The times do not need self improvers. They need heroes. The times need true heroes, which means saints. Self improvers are made, not born. True heroes, saints, are born again, not

made. They are born again into the new life of Grace, a new life of awareness of God's Presence and will. By that power, they can do great deeds. Not on their own, but by God's direction and inspiration, the true heroes remake themselves, and remake their times.

In today's Gospel from chapter 17 of St. Luke, the Lord Jesus Christ makes those who have done only what they had to do say of themselves "We are unprofitable servants". That certainly sounds like a command to work hard, doesn't it? But consider the entire passage. The Lord Jesus only says this after He has talked about the absolute necessity of having Faith. By Faith, itself God's gift, we receive Grace. Grace assures us of Salvation, as long as we cooperate, and empowers us to do Good Works, and even great Works. We don't work to earn Grace. Rather, we receive the gift of Grace, and Grace enables us to Good Works. As St. Augustine's disciple, the poet and lay theologian Prosper of Aquitaine puts it, "God's Chosen receive Grace, not to allow them to remain idle . . . but to enable them to work well" Aware of God's Presence and will, saints in the making can work with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, because they have a confidence and certainty that this world simply cannot give, and cannot even imitate.

For St. Augustine, the Martyrs were the best, but hardly the only, examples of what Grace can do in ordinary people. Grace gave them perfect freedom. Aware of God's Presence and will, they didn't care what human tyranny and human fear commanded. "Grace gave a liberty . . . protected and made firm . . . that the world should be overcome . . . in all its terrors, in all its countless ways of going wrong" Even the world's best and brightest, the elite, the best of the best, have countless ways of going wrong, and do in fact go wrong in countless ways. Even quite ordinary people, however, once they receive Grace, do good, do good almost exclusively the longer they cooperate with Grace, and often do good heroically.

When I was a kid, the Marine recruiting slogan was "The Few, The Proud, The Marines" I decided in college that this could almost be the slogan of the Pelagian heresy: The Few, the Proud, the Saints. My, oh my, how hard they have worked! What discipline they have endured! But such is not the way of Christianity's Saints, the authentic Saints. Here they are - The Many, the Humble, the Saints. Pelagius had little interest in ordinary people, not ready to commit full time to making themselves saints. St. Augustine loved ordinary people, who didn't have the time for full time saint making. St. Augustine, far wiser than Pelagius about the Bible's deep meaning, knew that full time work didn't make someone a Saint. Only God's Grace did that, and God's Grace was offered to all. All anyone had to do was accept that Grace, and then cooperate with it, through the routines and rhythms of daily life. For St. Augustine, there was no room for the notion that some Christians, by sheer hard work, could make themselves more perfect than others. All stood in equal need of God's Grace, and all would become truly holy by daily cooperation with that Grace. St. Augustine loved nuns, for example, and strongly urged young women to consider prayerfully whether God might be calling them to the life of religious virginity modeled by St. Paul, Our Lady, and Our Lord Himself. At the same time, he reminded them never to dare imagine themselves as being the Church's elite. It is not the discipline of virginity that earned them God's Grace. It is God's Grace that made it possible to live their Christian calling, and their particular calling of religious virginity, and to live those callings

joyfully. It is the same Grace that made it possible for married women to live their Christian calling, and their particular calling of Christian marriage, and to live those callings joyfully. The same was, and is, true of all Christians. We are all fundamentally equal, because we are equally dependent on, and inspired and empowered by, the Grace of God.

The times are bad, in significant ways. You might consider yourself too imperfect a Christian to do much about these times. Don't worry about that. God's vision for your holiness still has its time, it presses on to fulfillment, it will not disappoint. Those who are still struggling with normal human vices, but avoiding serious sin and starting to cooperate with Grace, are already on their way to becoming Saints. Just persevere!

Who are the Saints who will change the times?

Some are already habitually aware of God's Presence and will, and are already the heroes of our times.

But they are not the only Saints who will change the times, far from it

Who are those other Saints?

I will let St. Augustine answer that question.

Those other Saints in the making are those "who indulge their sexual appetites, although within the decorous bonds of marriage . . . and even enjoy it; who put up with injuries with less than complete patience; who may burn at times for revenge but don't seek it; who give to charity, but not very lavishly; who do not take other people's property, though they defend their own . . . But who through all of this see themselves as small, and God as glorious"

Who see themselves as small, and God as glorious.

That is the key.

It is not necessary to be close to perfect right now. Right now it is necessary only to open the door of the heart and let in God's Grace, and then to begin to cooperate with that Grace, knowing how lost we are without Grace, and how Great is the Giver of Grace.

From that modest starting point, great things will arise: Goodness, Salvation, Holiness, and Heroism. All of these are impossible without Grace, but certain as long as we cooperate with God's Grace.

O grant us help against the foe,

For vain is the help of man!

With God we shall do valiantly,

It is He Who will tread down our foes. (Psalm 60: 12)

Amen.