

SEPTEMBER 25, 2022

“Fight the Good Fight of the Faith”, writes St. Paul to St. Timothy in today’s second reading, taken from Paul’s First Epistle to Timothy.

The New American Bible prefers to say “Compete well for the Faith”. This is certainly quite defensible. The old Greek word “Agon” can be translated either as “Fight” or as “Competition”, since the old Greeks didn’t distinguish between the two.

In modern English, of course, we sharply distinguish between “Fight” and “Competition” We expect people in various contests to be competitive, but we also expect them to have the attitude of “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game” Of course, when it comes to an actual fight, no one says “It’s not whether you win or lose”. In a competition, losing is not, in principle, a disaster. In a fight it might be a disaster, even a lethal disaster.

I have an interest in the history of ancient Greek athletic and cultural competitions. I can say confidently that no ancient Greek would have understood or agreed with “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game”. They played to win, with no interest in second place. In the modern Olympics there are Gold, Silver, and Bronze medals. No such notion ever occurred to the ancient Greeks. First place, and only first place, was honored and remembered.

With that in mind, I have a strong preference for the more traditional rendering of this passage as “Fight the Good Fight”

Fight the Good Fight of Faith.

Fight, because the consequences of defeat are disastrous, even eternally so.

Grab hold of Eternal Life, and don’t let anything or anyone loosen your grip.

In chapter 32 of Genesis, there is a famous passage in which Jacob mysteriously wrestles with an angel of the Lord. Jacob had quarreled badly with his uncle, with whom he had been living in exile, but finally the two men had reconciled, and made covenant with each other. Now, on his way back home, Jacob learns that his brother Esau, whom he had cheated outrageously many years earlier, is coming towards him with a small army. Jacob resolves not to resist, and spends the night before his brother’s arrival in intense prayer. Towards the end of the prayer vigil, in the early a.m. hours, he finds himself grappling ferociously and desperately in the dark with an Angel of the Lord. Jacob is hurt as the two struggle, but he doesn’t let go. With the first hints of dawn, the Angel declares that he has to leave. Still, Jacob refuses to let go, until he receives a blessing. The Angel blesses him with a new name, “Israel - Strong with God”, and disappears. The fierce fight - definitely a fight, not a “competition” - left Jacob/Israel with a strange combination of physical injury and spiritual blessing. By the power of that spiritual blessing, he was able to reconcile with Esau, settle again in his homeland, and worship God again at Bethel, the place where, as a young man, he had first seen the Lord.

Jacob earnestly, urgently and passionately wanted God's blessing. That is the whole point of his story in chapters 25-35 of Genesis. He wanted that blessing, but didn't know how to get it. Seeking that blessing, he fought others, his family, and even God Himself. And he got the blessing! Jacob was a fighter, and the Lord blessed that fighter, more than he blessed his more peaceful twin, Esau.

Esau is not a villain in the story of Jacob, not a villain at all. Esau just doesn't care about God's blessing. Not caring about it, he doesn't get it. Jacob cares about it intensely. He makes severe mistakes in seeking it, but he cares. In that final, ferocious fight with the Angel, he gets hurt, but he doesn't let go. "I will not let go unless you bless me" And he is blessed. He is even honored. From now on, call yourself Israel, the Angel says - "Strong with God"

When St. Paul tells Timothy to fight the Good Fight of the Faith, he is telling Timothy to care about God's blessing offered in Jesus Christ. St. Paul is telling Timothy to care about it intensely. Even if there is much you don't understand, even if you make mistakes along the way, care about receiving that blessing, nothing less than a share in Divine Life. Care about it enough to fight for it, obstinately hearing the Lord's word and singing his praises, day in and day out, in good times and bad, in sickness and in health. Care about it enough to fight for it, taking strong action to avoid occasions of sin, and doing strong penance for sins committed. Shout at the Lord if you have to, but be a fighter. Don't let go. Say to the Lord "I will not let go unless you bless me". And He will bless you. He will even honor you. Indeed, on the last day He will crown you with the crown of victory. "Keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords".

All of this that he tells Timothy, St. Paul also tells us. Care intensely about eternal life. Despite doubts and mistakes, care about it. Care about it enough to fight for it. Let nothing keep you from regular hearing of God's word. Let nothing keep you from daily praising the Lord. For richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, keep fighting the Good Fight. Do what has to be done to avoid occasions of sin. Do what has to be done in penance for sins committed. Pour your hearts out to the Lord, even if there is some anger and doubt in what you pour out. Just don't let go. Never let go. "I will not let go unless you bless me" That is a prayer He will honor and answer.

The Lord's word to us, through Genesis and Paul's words to Timothy, is that the reward for perseverance is the crown of victory. If we persevere in fighting the Good fight, the Lord, the just judge, will award to us the Crown of Righteousness. This is His promise to all who long for His coming, and never let go.

This passage from St. Paul to Timothy has particular meaning for us clergy. The Great 4th Century Bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose, cited this passage in his treatise ON THE DUTIES OF THE CLERGY. "You are fighting for God . . . he who fights for the emperor is forbidden by human law to enter upon lawsuits or do any legal business or sell merchandise. How much more ought he who enters upon the warfare of Faith to keep away from every kind of business. Let him be satisfied with the produce of his own little bit of land, if he has it. If he has not that,

let him be content with the pay he will get for his service” In St. Ambrose’s day, some of the clergy received for their support some land that they could rent out. Others received regular pay. Today, of course, we receive regular pay. We are told to be content with this pay, and not engage in extracurricular business activities to increase our income. Why not? Because that would distract us from fighting the Good Fight of the Faith. There are sins and doubts in us that can only be combated by spiritual means. There are sins and spiritual errors in the world around us that we have to fight, and we can’t fight those if we are occupied in business affairs. We have a fight on our hands, the Good Fight of the Faith, and are to concentrate on that.

This passage also has meaning for laity too, of course. A century and half before the great Bishop Ambrose, the North African layman Tertullian, the first known Christian writer in Latin, with this passage in mind, wrote to his fellow Christians “You are about to enter a noble contest in which the living God acts the part of the Judge, and the Holy Spirit is your trainer, whose crown is eternity, whose prize is angelic nature, citizenship in Heaven, for ever and ever” The Lord wants to give you the prize of a share in Divine Life, but before you can receive that prize, you have to take on the devil. Such an opponent is frightening, but the very good news is that the judge for this fight is on your side. His Holy Spirit is training you, if you listen to God’s word. If you listen to God’s word and keep fighting, you will win. It is that simple. The Lord guarantees the prize of Eternal Life for all who keep fighting.

So keep fighting!

Persevere!

Never let anything distract you from some daily time with the Lord’s words and the Lord’s praise. Never let anything keep you away from the saving power contained in the Sacraments. Be deliberate about avoiding the occasions of sin, and when you do sin, do penance. In these ways you will fight the Good fight of the Faith. Having fought the Good Fight of the Faith, you will receive the Crown of Righteousness, which the Just Judge has ready for you, and for all who long for His coming.

The fight against the devil will seem long and complicated at times. The devil has many on earth who cooperate with him, with varying degrees of awareness of what they are doing, and the odds may seem to be against us. For this reason, the Just Judge allows us helpers in our struggle, the Church on earth, and the Angels and Saints of Heaven. Of all these helpers, the most powerful, under our Lady Mary, is St. Micheal. In chapters 10 and 12 of the Book of Daniel, Micheal is described as “the great prince who stands for the children of Your people” He still is. Micheal is the protector of the people of the Covenant with Moses, and the protector of the People of the New Covenant as well. In the New Testament, in chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation, we read that Micheal and his angels fought the dragon and his angels, and cast them down. Whenever there is need to drive off the dragon and the fallen angels, invoke St. Micheal, against whom they cannot stand. This is particularly true when the devil is causing you to despair because of past sins. The Letter of Jude refers to the devil once claiming Moses, only for St. Micheal to drive him off with the simple words “The Lord rebuke you” This seems to refer to an ancient piece of Jewish literature called “The Assumption of Moses”, in which the devil claims Moses because in youth Moses committed a murder (hot tempered as a young

man, he impulsively slew an Egyptian he saw beating a Hebrew slave). Though enraged, all Micheal says to the devil is “The Lord rebuke you, you slanderer” , whereupon the devil flees. The devil delights in causing us to despair on account of our past sins. Against that despair, invoke St. Micheal, who always drives the devil off, and allows us to recall the Divine Mercy, a Mercy that, in Jesus Christ, both forgives and changes us, washing away our past sins and strengthening us in Faith, Hope, and Love.

On 29 September we have the Feast of St. Micheal and, indeed, all the angels. The angels are perfectly happy, sharing as they do in Divine Life. They do not hoard their happiness, but want to share it with us. Under the Lord Jesus’ guidance, they assist us in many ways in fighting the Good Fight of the Faith, until we finally reach Faith’s goal, our salvation.

We have many allies in our fight. The Just Judge is Himself our ally. It is guaranteed that if we keep fighting, we will win. Therefore, with the guidance and inspiration of the Lord Jesus, let us Fight the Good Fight of the Faith, doing whatever we need to do in order to keep the commandments, until the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ.