

A Holy Obligation

Sermon preached at Christ Church, Georgetown
Washington, D.C.
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204th Annual Parish Meeting

by Andrew A. Kryzak

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Week by week in the church, we tend to pay a lot of attention to the four gospels, to Sts Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and there's good reason for that. As Christians, our first concern is to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength. You can't love someone whom you don't know, and by hearing our Lord's words, hearing of his great deeds, and hearing of his death and resurrection from the dead, we come to know who he is, and we come to awareness of his making himself known to us by the Holy Spirit.

The epistles, however, perhaps unintentionally, tend to get short shrift, and that's too bad. The letters of St Paul are actually the *earliest* witness to our Lord Jesus Christ that we have. The scholarly consensus dates Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in the AD 50s, about ten years before the gospel of St Mark began to be written down.

And the epistles are wonderful. Not only are they full of lively exhortation and evangelism; they also give us a really cheering reminder of the struggles and joys that have been part of the life of Christian communities in all times and in all places since the very first days of the church.

That is worth considering on this particular Sunday, when we hold the 204th annual meeting of this parish. We have been here, on this corner, for a very long time, bearing witness to our Lord's death and resurrection, and we will be doing so, God willing, until he shall come again. We are the heirs of St Paul, in that way, and we are the successors to that rag-tag group of Christians who were the first ones to proclaim the Name of Jesus Christ in the city of Corinth.

It will be helpful to us, therefore, to think a little bit about those early Christians in that ancient city. Corinth was an *entrepôt*, favorably situated for commerce, and it had every accoutrement of a busy mercantile town at an important Mediterranean crossroads. In the first century, its population was growing and diverse, consisting of freed Roman slaves, of Syrians and Egyptians, Greeks, and a sizeable Jewish community. The rich and poor lived side by side, and rapid social and economic advancement was available to those with talent, energy, and luck. Businesses

stood hard against temples dedicated to pagan gods, and games and festivals drew tens of thousands of visitors every year.¹

And as we learn from Paul's letter, the city provided every conceivable pitfall to the early Christians as they tried to work out how to faithfully live out the holy lives to which they had been called. It shouldn't surprise us that Paul wrote his letter *in response* to an inquiry from the Corinthians themselves, as they tried to navigate matters of sexual immorality, legal disputes, abuses of the Lord's Supper, and other pressing matters.

In the midst of addressing their concerns, St Paul writes, as we have just heard this morning,

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!²

That statement tells us everything about what it meant for Paul to follow our Lord. Paul, as we know, had met the risen Christ on the road, took everything that was within his considerable ability and put it to use in the Lord's service. This is what it means to love the Lord thy God will "all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," and that's what Paul writes in his reply to the Corinthians' good questions. Just before this passage, when Paul addresses the issue of eating meat offered to idols, he is clear that he couldn't care less. But, he tells them, since not everyone knows that idols are a fiction, Christians seen to be eating meat sacrificed in such a way could be an impediment to others' faith: "take care," he therefore writes, "that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block to the weak."³ For Paul, the Corinthians' public behavior was as much part and parcel of their Christian obligation as were their prayers and devotions.

"Being a Christian" I think is sometimes quite a mystified thing. We think quite a bit about going to church and the institutional life of the parish, but we think a lot less I would wager about the ministry of the individual Christian, living out in the world on the other six days of the week.

In her surprisingly wonderful and charming book detailing the breakdown of her first marriage, the actor and writer Isabel Gillies tells a story about marital strife on the day of her son's baptism. "If we had had any foresight, we could have avoided [the ugly row] altogether. Of course [my husband and the godfather] were going to go out and have fun, but of course I couldn't be blamed for wanting a not-hungover husband on the first day of my son's life as a Christian."⁴ I have to admit, up until reading this book when it was published in 2009, I had

¹ Laurence L. Welborn, "The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians," in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, fifth edition, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2035.

² 1 Corinthians 9:16

³ 1 Corinthians 9:10

⁴ Isabel Gillies, *Happens Every Day: An All-Too-True Story* (New York: Scribner's, 2009), 27.

never really thought about the faith that way: on Saturday, you're not a Christian; you're baptized on Sunday, and then you are a Christian, just like that, and then you're different, and you can no longer live by the same old rules. Having a "first day" in a person's life as a Christian, in Gillies' perfectly ordinary-sounding phrase, teaches us that Christianity is connected not to our membership in this particular parish in this particular place, but to our baptism into Jesus Christ.

We can often lose the thread of the that in the intrigues of church drama, of the particularities and proprieties of the liturgy, and the complexity of the devotional system. But the church is not at its core an institution that is separate from its members: As was the case for the Corinthians, the church is a school of prayer, a gathering of fellow travelers in the way of the Cross. That can get a bit obscured by *Robert's Rules of Order* and the necessary business of choosing leadership and keeping our accounts in order (by the way, the Corinthians also had to do all of this).⁵ The church is not an institutional proxy for its members: the church is the collection of its members,⁶ who, as the Prayer Book says, gather together on Sundays to "render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul."⁷ Having done that, we do what we are told to do at the end of this and every Sunday morning Communion service: we *go in peace, to love and serve the Lord*.

That means that nothing is held back from our Lord, and that our daily existence as Christians is given not over to our own glory, to our own needs and concerns. It doesn't mean that we don't go to work or exist in networks of family and friends and neighbors. But of course it matters a great deal *how* we exist in those networks, because a holy obligation has been laid on us, and so in all things, a Christian's life should point not to himself, but to Jesus Christ.

As we embark upon this 204th year gathered together to bear witness to our Lord right here on the corner of 31st and O streets, let us take the opportunity to rededicate our whole lives to that important work, each and every day of the week.

AMEN.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 16:1-3

⁶ It is for this reason that Barth wrote, "It would be great gain, could Luther's urgent desire have been carried out and the word 'congregation' had taken the place of the word 'Church.'" Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 143.

⁷ Bidding at Morning and Evening Prayer, *Book of Common Prayer*, 1928.