

## Homily for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent

I don't know if you did a double-take when you heard St. Paul in our second reading today from Romans say that we are not in the flesh? At first, I felt like saying: "What do you mean, Paul, of course I am! Flesh and blood, here I am. Isn't this stuff hanging to my arms and legs flesh?"

But, like many words, when it comes to the word "flesh", there are multiple layers of meaning. So here, when Paul is speaking about the flesh, he's not talking about the biology of skin that covers muscle and fat tissues. Rather, he's referring to that part of us that lives apart from faith and is closed off to God. The flesh is that part of us that is not transformed by God – that is connected to this fallen world of sin. It's this material world that influences us apart from God. And what is "of the flesh" is displeasing to God, because flesh relates to actions and decisions that arise independently from our self-will, as opposed to God's will.

Standing in opposition to the flesh is what St. Paul terms the spirit. Whereas flesh is that natural part of us that is closed off to God, the spirit is that supernatural part of us that is alive because of God. While our body is earthly – "Remember, you are dust, and to dust you shall return – our soul is spiritual, and is immortal, meaning without end. And, as children of God, baptized into Christ, you and I are born again of water and the Holy Spirit. And because we have God's Spirit dwelling within our spirits, we have eternal life because God is eternal.

So, that's why St. Paul can say that we as Christians are not "in the flesh", but rather, "in the spirit", but "only if the Spirit of God dwells in us". It is God's Spirit, who raised Jesus from the dead dwelling in us – in our spirits – that gives everlasting life to these mortal bodies of ours.

OK...great, so now all of you understand that 100%, and you're all ready to get your biblical theology degrees – right? Yes, I know that was quite complicated and even philosophical to boot. However, there's a reason I'm bringing this all up today, aside from the fact that it's in today's Scriptures. And that reason is because this has everything to do with how we live our lives: do we live natural lives or supernatural lives; do we live according to the flesh or to the spirit.

We have a choice. And we are the only ones who can make that choice for ourselves. We can live out of the flesh or we can live by the spirit. And, as St. Paul says in another of his letters – to the Galatians – that "God is not mocked, for a person will reap only what he sows, because the one who sows for his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows for the spirit will reap eternal life from the spirit." In other words, what you plant is what you get.

If you live for the flesh, you'll have natural happiness from time to time. But, don't be surprised that that natural happiness – things, pleasure, money, stuff – doesn't last or ultimately satisfy on the deepest level, because it is of this world. Further still, don't be surprised if you're not deeply happy and joy-filled because a life lived in the flesh is ultimately closed off to God, even if we do good things by the flesh. In this way of life, God does not occupy the first place in our lives; rather our self-will does.

However, if we live in the spirit, we will more and more be creating a welcome place for the Holy Spirit within us. And as St. Paul also says in Galatians, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” If we live in the spirit, we will also have happiness mixed with sadness. But the major difference here is that what makes us truly happy cannot be taken away from us. If we are living for God, God, and all those fruits I just mentioned, can never be taken away from us. And so, even when illness, hurt, death, and misfortune touch our lives, God, who occupies the first place in our lives, carries us through. And further, it's doing God's will that makes us truly happy in life, because God is our Creator, who created us to live according to His design and His will.

Also, when it comes to fighting sin and temptation in our lives, if we try to fight the sinful desires of our flesh with the resources of the flesh, then we will fail. Flesh cannot overcome flesh, and we will just keep repeating the same things over and over again. Will-power only lasts so long. Our strength is limited. And our minds can so easily be changed. However, when we ask God's Spirit to fill our spirits, then we are asking God for His help. And then, God Himself comes to fight our battles, and spirit defeats flesh. As I said a couple weeks ago, we constantly need to go to God throughout the day and ask Him to fill us with the Holy Spirit again and again. When God's Spirit dwells in us we have life, and we live life in an ordered, balanced way. When our flesh dictates how we're going to live, we go about with death within us – sadness, depression, worry, fear – and, we live in an unbalanced way, yo-yoing back and forth between extremes.

My friends, God wants us not merely to get through this life – surviving it all. Rather, He wants us to thrive until we come into His eternal Kingdom. And so, as we receive the holy Eucharist today, may Jesus, who is truly received within our bodies, also come through His Spirit to dwell ever more deeply in our souls. God bless you.