

First Sunday In Lent – 2010
Sermon – Christ Church Parish
Father Michael Erickson
The Collect

In the Collect for this First Sunday in Lent, we pray for that divine grace by which we may subdue our flesh to the Spirit. This is a most curious choice of words, as it conjures forth the image of restraining a bucking bronco or a wild lion. Nevertheless, we are inclined to think, as it is the Spirit alone that is mighty, that wind which fills the caverns of the listless soul, or that flame which enlightens the tongue of the man otherwise lost in his own, sordid babble, the flesh by contrast must be small and in itself lifeless. It is a clay vessel, caught up in that grand, cosmic battle among unseen powers and principalities, where the Archangel Michael revokes the many wiles of Satan; but, in itself, it is too insubstantial to play a part in this drama. The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. How then may we talk of subduing the flesh, when it is so weak and insubstantial in comparison to the unseen?

We first must understand that this question, in how it is being articulated here, belies a most unhelpful conceit. The inference is that Spirit alone matters; indeed, only that which cannot be seen, heard, tasted, felt, or for that matter even properly imagined is real. Our very own bodies, and by extension all things, which we may know by our senses, pass away: they die, or spoil, or erode. As they are forever victims of time, they are in comparison to the Spirit mere illusions. This conceit, that Spirit alone is real, and flesh by contrast is unreal, is at the heart of a doctrine known as Gnosticism. It is intrinsically anti-Christian, as it debases all of God's creations as unreal or at the very least insubstantial. It implies that nothing then within this world really has any moral value. That includes you and me, since we live here as fleshly beings. For the Gnostic, as we too have no real, moral value, we do not have any real, moral responsibility to this world or in how we conduct ourselves with other men. How sad really it is to think that we do not matter, until we cease to be ourselves.

We may castigate this as anti-Christian, as is proper so to do; but, first, we must consider how often we too descend into this manner of thought. For example, when we consider how men die, we imagine some sort of phantom, or ethereal spirit, floating out of a corpse. The image is soothing, like that of winged angels with their melodious harps atop puffy, white clouds. The airy phantom then ascends softly through the proverbial tunnel

towards a light, hardly, if ever, feeling the lonely sting of real, visceral death. There is no sense of the Cross in this image: no acceptance of the fact that, as moral beings, we must bare responsibility for our deeds, and take on our personal crosses, before truly we may grasp onto the redemption offered once and for all times by the Crucified Christ. In this image, we do not need to follow in the footsteps of Christ, even unto Golgotha, in order to float airily into the light. And why? Because in this Gnostic view, it is the phantom - the unseen spirit ascending from the corpse - which in the end is real, not the flesh; therefore, what any man has or has not done while living within his flesh has no lasting, moral consequence. For the Gnostic, man does not need the Crucified Christ, for he is not really responsible.

Whenever we separate Spirit from flesh in this manner, we too are trying to escape all moral implications of our own behavior. We too are endeavoring to find salvation without tasting the harsh vinegar of death on the Cross, that is to say without giving ourselves completely over to Christ Jesus. It is the very strongest of temptations: that we may live forever on our own terms, without that self-sacrifice implicit in accepting the gift of redemption. Our sins may go unnoticed, we tell ourselves. We may not die after all - merely "pass on" to another and presumably better realm of existence.

The temptation to think in this manner is so strong, that indeed it is akin to a wild animal needing to be subdued. This is what is meant by living "in the flesh" - not the Gnostic view of Spirit and flesh being intrinsically separate, but rather orienting oneself away from that eternal life, which is only possible in God. To live "in the Spirit" then is to be oriented fully toward God, in virtue of superabundance of love offered by the Crucified Christ. The one or the other is now and always our choice, as God loves too perfectly to allow for any one of us to escape responsibility for our lives.