

St. Mary's Catholic Church – Bryantown, Maryland
September 27th, 2009

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners,

In our Gospel reading for this Sunday today Jesus uses a figure of speech which was known to His fellow Jews and which is the key to understanding the reading. The figure of speech is the word "Gehenna". Gehenna was a valley south of the city of Jerusalem. Before the Israelites settled there human sacrifices had been offered in this valley by the pagans to their gods. Because it was a place of death, the Jews regarded Gehenna as evil. In fact, no Jew would build their home there and it became a refuse pit where trash was set on fire. Over time Gehenna became a figure of speech meaning the place of damnation, or, as we say in English, "hell."

Jesus uses other figures of speech in this Gospel reading. He says that if our hands, feet or eyes cause us to sin, we would be wise to cut them off or gouge them out rather than risk being thrown into Gehenna, or hell. Of course, Jesus doesn't expect us to take this saying literally. If we did, we would all be blind amputees. However, Jesus does expect us to take His warning about the danger of sin seriously.

Unfortunately, we do not always take sin seriously. Since we live in a world full of sin, we may sometimes regard most of our sins as trivial, and things that everyone does. However, Jesus reminds us that they can be life-threatening illnesses, for which the only cure is a drastic operation. We can only begin to understand the gospel when we realize that our condition is indeed serious. We are sinners who have a desperate need for forgiveness and salvation. Only when we feel this need will we turn to Christ in humble repentance, and seek His forgiveness and mercy. In fact, if we do not take sin seriously, we will not understand the crucifixion. Death on the cross was the price that our Savior had to pay to free us from the dominion of sin, Satan and death.

God is infinitely holy, and every sin, even the slightest, is an affront to His perfect holiness. Since this is so, we must strive to root out sin from our lives. This may sound a harsh message, but we need not be discouraged. Though we should take our sins seriously, we also know that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven as long as we repent of it. Jesus has set us free from sin and forgiveness is always available to us when we come before Him.

In baptism we have come to share in His death and resurrection: we have died with Him to sin, and risen to new life. Though we still struggle daily with sin, there is a new power at work in us that can give us victory. When we do stumble, we can receive forgiveness through Confession and continue on our journey towards the perfect holiness to which we are called.

Jesus uses a figure of speech, the word Gehenna, to warn us of the danger of sin. He also uses figures of speech to tell us of our need to make a radical change away from sin. But sin itself, despite what some people may say, is no figure of speech. It is very real. Fortunately, so also is God's forgiveness for those who are humble and honest enough to seek it. The Lord doesn't want any of us to doubt His mercy or to walk around feeling guilty for our sins. This is why He has given us the wonderful Sacrament of Penance & Reconciliation. So, when your hands, feet or eyes, or your brain or your tongue cause you to sin, come and receive the Lord's forgiveness.

With my prayers,

Fr. Conley