

It is almost impossible to read through the newspapers or listen to the various TV broadcasts today and not conclude that the world is really screwed up. G. K. Chesterton, famous 20th century English author and defender of Christianity was one day reading his daily paper, *The Times* of London. In it he found an article entitled, "What's Wrong with the World?" The skilled, committed Christian took out his pen and wrote a one line letter to the editor in response to the article indicating his answer to that question. His statement was simply this: "I am, Yours truly, G. K. Chesterton."

Chesterton's response touches on a powerful and reoccurring theme in Lent: The real wrongs of the world reside in our own hearts. This lesson is brought out in our Epistle from St. Paul to the Thessalonians 4:1-8. The apostle states, "This is the will of God, your holiness: that you refrain from immorality, . . . For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness." In other words, St. Paul instructs the people of God to look within, to address their own personal sins and impurities as an acceptable approach to addressing the ills of the world. To quote a recent Archbishop of Canterbury, "For a relatively short spell, we are asked to look within to find the roots of the world's disaster, not to search for them outside, in others, or in the unbeliever. Our hearts are still on the way to full conversion, and so the work of the Cross, finished in itself once and for all, is still working itself through the life of every Christian. Lent is our best opportunity to let God move more deeply and permanently into the areas of our lives that still resist his grace." (Rowan Cantaur, Lent 2006)

The Apostle Paul calls this process of dealing with our own personal sins, "sanctification". The word in the Greek language means to "become holy". St. Paul teaches that sanctification is progressive; it is to be worked out continually in our own personal walk with God - day in and day out. It doesn't happen all at once. It is a process involving becoming acutely aware that the real evil in the world does indeed lurk in our own hearts.

I like what Alexander Solzhenitsyn once wrote: if there were "evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, then it would be necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

Evil is indeed at the core of ourselves. St. Paul and the Church, by leading us to his marvelous concept of sanctification in Lent, draw us to deal with those dark corners of our lives. We are to let God go there and shine His light everywhere. We are to let Him have access to everything, penetrating even the so-called small places where evil hides in even the best of us. Most of us have hopefully read C. S. Lewis's profound series of imagined letters between two demons, Screwtape and Wormwood. It's called *Screwtape Letters*. In one of the letters, Screwtape instructs Wormwood, "You will say that these are very small sins, and doubtless, like all young tempters, you are anxious to be able to report spectacular wickedness. But do remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man from the Enemy [God]. It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to keep the man away from the Light . . . Murder is no better than a game of cards if cards can do the trick. Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." Lewis' point is that the devil doesn't have to use big, showy sins to keep man away from God. Look at what the Devil offered Jesus in the readings of last week during His forty day fast in the desert; they didn't work. Look at what seems to work in this day and age – the seemingly small, insignificant, minor indiscretions that in cumulative fashion bring down both the small and the big and powerful people in this world. Satan will use anything to keep a person away from the Light of God's love and presence.

SERMON – THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT – 12 - MARCH 2017

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Rev. Sam A. Steere III, Assisting Priest

Why? The purity of God's Light is what illuminates and eliminates the small places in our lives where the Devil's evil lurks. Lurk, indeed, it still does!

A pastor in Haiti told his congregation of a certain man who wanted to sell his house for \$2000. Another man badly wanted it, but couldn't afford the full price. After much haggling, the owner agreed to sell the house for half the asking price with just one stipulation: he would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from just over the door. The deal was consummated, but after several years, the original owner decided he wanted the house back. The new owner was unwilling to sell, so the first owner went out, found the carcass of a dead animal, and hung it from the single nail he still owned. Soon the house became uninhabitable, and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail. The Haitian pastor's conclusion: "If we leave the devil with even one small peg in our life, he will return to hang his rotting garbage on it, making it unfit for Christ's habitation."

St. Paul reminds us today that we are to pull out that one nail during Lent. We are through our repentance and penance to let God go where perhaps He has never been before in our souls, into the small hidden places where we think we are really not all that bad. We are to let him shine his bright light of forgiveness on those small hidden places, and let Him remove them and their cumulative effect from the person He wants us to be. No rotting flesh is to be left on those small nails of opportunity that lie in each of us. The only way for this process of sanctification to occur is to let the light and life of Jesus Christ shine in those places. This will come through personal discipline, worship, prayer, reading Scripture, and sacrificing for others that are the characteristics of a meaningful Lenten journey. May such characteristics be the hallmarks of the Lenten journey for each of us, this Lent! *Amen.*