

Sermon 29.05.2022

Acts 16:16-34

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-end

John 17:20-end

In his 71st Epistle “On the Supreme Good”, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, wrote that “When a person does not know what harbour they are making for, no wind is the right wind.”

Let me share that thought with you again. “When a person does not know what harbour they are making for, no wind is the right wind.”

Seneca was a Roman stoic philosopher and statesman, and he lived from 4 BC to 65 AD, meaning he was very close in age to Our Lord. In this epistle, he sets forth his own teaching about providence. What will our future be like? What forces shape our future? Can we do anything to change our future? The theologian Ulrich Zwingli included him in his list of ‘righteous pagans’, men, and women, who did not know of Christ but whose work reflected a Christian belief.

“When a man does not know what harbour he is making for, no wind is the right wind.” The meaning of this quote is clear. Without a clear sense of direction or purpose, our lives drift aimlessly, we fill our time with pointless distractions, and we do not live a full Christian life. As Seneca puts it “our plans miscarry because they have no aim”. He wrote that “as often as you wish to know what is to be avoided or what is to be sought, consider its relation to the Supreme Good, to the purpose of your whole life.” When you are unsure of what to do, consider its relation to that Supreme Good.

Today, I propose that this is an inherently Christian message, substituting that Supreme Good with Our Lord God, although of course, Supreme Goodness is characteristic, and even synonymous with the One, True, **Christian** God. We must, however, be careful to avoid a Deist interpretation. A deist interpretation would mean that there is a God, but one that does not reveal itself to man –God is not immanent. God is the Supreme Good, but that is not all that God is. We have confidence that our God is the one God because he has revealed himself in human flesh, through the Incarnation of Christ. “God, the God of Jesus Christ, is our supreme good, but the Supreme Good is not God.”

“The archer must know what he is seeking to hit; then he must aim and control the weapon by his skill” Seneca continues. As Christians, we know which target we are seeking to hit, although it often seems as though we are more like the ancient Greek hero Perseus with the discus, hurling our missile into the crowd, than Robin Hood, hitting the centre with ease. In fact, the word St Paul uses for sin is *harmartia*, a Greek archery term meaning “falling short” or “missing the mark” even though we might aim in the right direction. That target of course, is union with God. And we can apply this quote, this analogy of the archer, to the readings we have heard today, although not all of it.

The context of our reading from Acts is that Paul had seen a “vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And “After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” (Acts 16:9-10). Paul has a very clear purpose which has been given to him by God, to go into Macedonia and to preach the Gospel, the Good News of Christ.

But Paul and Silas are buffeted by a wind. Paul “very much annoyed” drives an evil spirit from a slave, who is being exploited by her owners as a fortune teller and are consequently thrown into prison. It seems that Paul and Silas have been met by an unfavourable wind. It seems that the harbour is further from their reach. The arrow may not be on course to hit the target. This is where I will take issue with Seneca when he says, “The archer must know what he is seeking to hit; then he must aim and control the weapon by his skill.” Paul and Silas know that they cannot aim and control the weapon on their own. The true arbiter of our destination, the one who knows our innermost thoughts and desires and needs, must give them that ability to aim the weapon. Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God. And God responds in a dramatic way. He brings forth a “violent earthquake” so violent that the foundations are shaken, the doors fly open, and everyone’s chains come loose. Through prayer, Paul and Silas were never on the wrong course to their harbour. The wind, though it seemed unfavourable, was favourable because God interceded for them, responding to their prayer.

Now contrast this with the jailer. His harbour, his end, his duty, and his goal is to ensure that no one escapes from prison. And when this goal seems unattainable, when the prison doors are opened, when faced with the power of God, he looks to end his own life. The winds that seemed to be pushing him towards his goal, have changed, because the harbour was not of the highest value – the value that can only be found through Christ. It was compatible with the Supreme Good, but not with with the Living God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Note what happens when Paul speaks the word of the Lord to him. Look what happens when he is baptised. He is filled with joy because he had come to believe in God. Suddenly, he knows to which harbour he is sailing. He knows this through the prayer of Paul and Silas, through the working of God, and he knows that his salvation has come.

This message that prayer is the rudder that guides us through the wind is made clear in our Gospel. Our Gospel reading is an extract from the High Priestly Prayer, which Jesus prays before his betrayal and arrest, during the events of his Passion. Christ prays to the Father that “the glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one.” Christ prays to speak to the Father, to ask that he may be the favourable wind that leads us to the harbour that is our joy and our salvation. “When a man does not know what harbour he is making for, no wind is the right wind.” We have been given the means always to know to which harbour we are sailing. We have been given prayer to guide us, and to direct us to the harbour.

Our reading from Revelation also has an important insight to give us. The Lord tells us that he is “the Alpha and the Omega the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End”. He is our efficient cause, and our final cause. He is the one what creates us, and he is the

one what gives our creation purpose. Consider all your choices in relation to the will of God. He is the harbour that we leave, the boat we sail on, the favourable wind behind us, and he is the harbour to which we are sailing. He has given us a rudder that is Christ, and Christ has given us prayer and the sacraments, and the Spirit which descends upon the Church. "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen."