

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (7/19/20)

Our Lord speaks to us today of false prophets. That is, people who claim to be righteous and holy, who suppose to explain the Lord's ways, who presume to lead others in their lives - yet - they actually are serving themselves. Such as these try to look good - and may even be fooling themselves - but in reality their motives are not to advance others closer on their journey to the Lord, but rather for their own satisfaction, their own benefit, their own need to be seen as good and holy.

And that is the crux of it. To "look" good and holy. Jesus uses the brilliant imagery of the wolf in sheep's clothing. The false prophet enters the fold appearing to be one of their own. The exterior presentation is what may be expected, the pious acts are done correctly, the words contain a superficial resemblance to the Lord's words. However, within they are not just wolves, but "ravaging" or some translations say "ravaging" wolves. Inside they are one who prey on the sheep. Either by using their appearance to lull them into a feeling of safety and feed on them, or by using their interactions with them to make themselves feel more holy, competent, or secure. In the end the goal of the wolf is not the welfare of the sheep, but his/her own welfare. This is in direct contrast to the shepherds that Jesus speaks about which model themselves upon him the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

One difficult thing is to judge the false prophet from the true prophet. Jesus gives a way - he says *By their fruits you shall know them* - by the results of their actions. We look at a tree and judge what sort of fruit should be there. When he says *you do not gather grapes from thorns* he is reminding us that if the fruit being born is not what one would suspect - then there is something wrong. If the weedy thistle has figs on it, you should be wary - something is not right - maybe you should stay away from that fruit. Just so, if the individual professes to be a peacemaker in Christ, yet their words and actions we dissent - something is wrong. If they are, likewise a person who seems to not be so holy, yet great blessings come from them - you should look again. The fruit gives indication of what is beneath. However, the goal is to be sheep through and through. Not be outside to behave in a way that edifies others and leads them to the Lord, and in the inside be possessed of a pure disposition that brings with it true fruit of righteousness. When these two are in synchronization, then perhaps a prophet is in your midst.

There is an older woman in the parish who has a kindly and beautiful presentation - a sheep skin among sheepskins - and also whenever she speaks there is peace and consolation and all her actions seem aimed at the good of others - the fruit of the inner sheep. I often see her walk away after she has spoken and felt that a prophetic voice has been heard and God has been brought to the situation. This is what we must look for in others, and also what we must try to achieve in ourselves. Sometimes our sheepskins get a bit tarnished, sometimes we get into the mud and need cleaning, sometimes we have not been the model sheep that encourages others to follow the shepherd. This can be altered and we must work through confession and repentance and advice to change. We must also look at the inner disposition and always work to purify it and remove any hints of the evil of presumption or the sin of using others to increase our esteem, or advance our position. This is the ugly head of an inner wolf coming to the fore - and he must be banished.

St. Paul reminded us in the epistle that to bear fruit of shame leads to death, but to bear fruit unto sanctification brings life everlasting. It is not in the external piety that the fruits are shown (the saying "Lord, Lord"), but in the purifying the dispositions of the heart from which our fruit will grow. Jesus calls us to observe the false prophet and avoid one that leads away from him, and also to bear that fruit of a pure disposition - doing the will of the Father - so that we may enter the kingdom of heaven.