

PART FIVE 12:14 - 13:25

Living a Christian life

¹⁴Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

The goal of this oration is ultimately a practical one. Its author is encouraging and challenging the community to renew its commitment to Christ. The way in which he summarises and draws together the exhortations that have appeared throughout the oration indicates that in 12:14-29 we have the climax of this eminently pastoral sermon. Having just referred to the healing of the lame (12:13), he demonstrates his concern that everyone in the community be cared for. No one is to be abandoned or left behind as they pursue peace and holiness.

The peace of which he speaks is the peace enjoyed by a community that is in perfect harmony with God. It is the peace to which the prophets looked forward, the peace that would be God's gift through his Messiah, the peace of 'the last days'(1:1):

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

– Isaiah 45:10

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'

– Isaiah 52:7

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forever more.

– Ezekiel 37:26

This peace is the gift of the risen Christ: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you'(John 14:27; see John 20:19,21,26). It is referred to throughout the New Testament: 'Be at peace among yourselves'(1Thessalonians 5:13). 'Live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you'(2Corinthians 13:11). 'Let them turn away from evil and do good; let them seek peace and pursue it'(1Peter 3:11).

This peace is impossible without 'holiness' for it consists in communion with the All-holy God. Since only Christ can make us holy (see 2:11; 10:10,14), the pursuit of holiness means clinging to Christ, the Lord. It is necessarily a clinging in faith, for we do not yet see him (see 11:1). We eagerly await his coming, for we know that he will come to save us (see 9:28), when he takes us with him into the eternal embrace of his Father.

Everyone in the community is responsible to see that ‘no one fails to obtain the grace of God’. He is referring to the blessings of the new covenant gained for them by Christ. We recall his opening plea that we do not ‘drift away’ from the one who is speaking to us (2:1) and miss out on salvation through ‘neglect’ (2:3). We recall also his plea that none of us have an ‘unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin’(3:12-13). ‘Make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through disobedience’(4:11).

That his concern is fidelity to the new covenant is demonstrated by his quoting Isaiah:

You have seen their detestable things, the filthy idols that were among them. It may be that there is among you someone whose heart is already turning away from the Lord our God to serve the gods of those nations. It may be that there is among you a root sprouting poisonous and bitter growth.

- Isaiah 29:17-18

It is also illustrated by his referring to Esau who was ‘immoral’ (Greek: pornos) in the sense that he was unfaithful to the covenant with God (see Exodus 34:15-17), preferring his own momentary pleasure to the inheritance due to him as the first born. The story is found in Genesis 25:29-34. Our author is issuing a warning which he has given a number of times already. If we turn away from the only source of life and salvation, no amount of wishful thinking can gain us the blessings which we have rejected. The loss can become irreversible. That we ‘who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance’(9:15), it is essential that we ‘seize the hope set before us’ (6:18).

The seriousness of the situation has been underlined already in two of the most powerful warnings to be issued in the New Testament. We would do well to reflect again here on 6:4-8 and 10:26-31.

¹⁵See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.

¹⁶See to it that no one becomes like Esau, an immoral and godless person, who sold his birthright for a single meal.

¹⁷You know that later, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

¹⁸You have not come to [‘approached’] something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, ¹⁹and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

²⁰(For they could not endure the order that was given, ‘If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.’
(Exodus 19:12-13)

²¹Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear.’

²²But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

²⁴and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Our author is not attempting an abstract catechesis. He wants everyone in the community to be in communion with God. Hence the constant use throughout the oration of the language of worship. Verse eighteen echoes the Sinai narrative:

You approached and stood under the mountain while the mountain was a blazing fire while the very heavens shrouded in dark clouds with the sound of a mighty tempest. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.

– Deuteronomy 4:11-12 (LXX)

Mount Sinai was a mountain that could be touched. God issued a special injunction to ensure that the people did not touch it (see Exodus 19:12-13). The trumpets and the fear of the people are also noted in the Exodus account: ‘When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance’ (Exodus 20:18). Terrified by their experience, the people begged Moses: ‘You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die’ (Exodus 20:19). The versions that have come down to us do not mention Moses’ fear in the way in which our author does, though this could well have been part of the traditional interpretation.

By contrast, Christians have been called to approach another mountain on which darkness and fear are replaced by a festal gathering of angels and all those who share in the inheritance that belongs to Jesus, the ‘first born’ (1:6). This is ‘the city of our God, which God establishes forever’ (Psalm 48:8; see Psalm 87:1-7), the ‘heavenly Jerusalem’, the city prepared for Abraham (see 11:16), the ‘city that is to come’ (13:14). We are already approaching this mountain and this city when we come ‘to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant’, who is even now present among his brothers and sisters ‘in the midst of the congregation’ praising his Father (see 2:12).

The blood of Abel cried out to God to be avenged, and led to Cain’s desperation. The blood of Jesus cries out to God for forgiveness, and ‘obtains eternal redemption’ (9:12). ‘We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus’ (10:19).

The whole thrust of the oration is contained in the exhortation of verse twenty-five. It picks up the central exhortation of the Hebrew scriptures, expressed in the opening words of one of the key texts of the Torah: 'Listen, O Israel' (Deuteronomy 6:4). It is characteristic of the response given to God by the prophets: 'Speak, for your servant is listening' (1Samuel 3:10).

The oration opened on this theme: 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son' (1:1-2). 'Therefore, we must pay greater attention to what we have heard' (2:1). Our author delayed to reflect on the words of the Holy Spirit, recorded in Psalm 95: 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts' (3:7-8), at the conclusion of which he declared: 'Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account' (4:12-13).

He has already described how those who did not listen to God in the past died in the wilderness without reaching the goal of their journey. That was when God spoke to them on Mount Sinai. Now God is speaking to us through his Son who is in heaven, in the sanctuary which he has entered and to which he calls us. We are being invited into the kingdom of God. Unlike Mount Sinai, it cannot be shaken. Let us, then, listen and offer our lives in worship 'with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire'. Our author seems to be expressing something of what is expressed in Psalm 96. It makes a fitting reflection for us:

Honour and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary ... Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in holy splendour; tremble before him, all the earth. Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. He will judge the peoples with equity.' Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it.

– Psalm 96:6-11

²⁵See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking;

for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!

²⁶At that time his voice shook the earth; but now he has promised, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven' (Haggai 2:6).

²⁷This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of what is shaken — that is, created things — so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

²⁸Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe;

²⁹for indeed our God is a consuming fire.
(Deuteronomy 4:24)

¹Let mutual love continue.

²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.

Having just spoken of the importance of offering acceptable worship to God (12:28), the author focuses on how this is to be done. His teaching is traditional. He begins by exhorting his audience to live the kind of love (Greek: *philadelphia*) that is appropriate in a covenant community of ‘brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling’ (3:1), ‘brothers and sisters of Jesus (2:11). His appeal has special force in the light of the words of Jesus:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

– John 13:34-35

We might recall Paul’s exhortation:

Concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.

– 1 Thessalonians 4:9

The examples given by our author also recall Jesus’ words:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

– Matthew 25:35-36

He alludes to the scene where Abraham and Sarah gave hospitality, only to discover that their guests were messengers from God (see Genesis 18:1-21). They know from their own past experience what it means to show solidarity with those who are imprisoned or undergoing torture (see 10:32-34). Jesus chose to share to the full our human condition (2:14). As brothers and sisters in his household (3:6), we are to give ourselves for each other as he gave himself for us.

In the context of love, it is not surprising that our author moves immediately to speak of sexuality, for where else do all the dimensions of being human meet more intimately and more mysteriously than in our identity as man or woman? It is traditional Jewish and Christian wisdom that sexual relationships are to be sacraments in which we encounter the divine at the heart of another person cherished in love. There are divinely mysterious depths in every person. Sexual experience invites us into this mystery in which two people enjoy, encourage, heal, forgive and create each other in loving trust. There is a restlessness and a mysterious yearning at the heart of sexuality, for we know that we are not sufficient of ourselves. We need the other; we long to be in communion with the other. It is common human wisdom, born of experience, that when we give expression to our sexual desire we should do so in a way that recognises the sacredness and the dignity of our own person and of the other. Our author reminds us that we will be judged on how we express our sexual desires and needs. This is true of ‘fornicators’ whose sexual behaviour ignores all delicacy, bypasses love, and uses, even abuses, another person in a selfish attempt to assert one’s own power or gratify one’s own misdirected passion. It is especially true of ‘adulterers’ whose sexual behaviour ‘defiles’ the sacred bond that unites those who are committed to each other in the covenant of married love.

They must honour marriage and not be caught up in material possessions. The link between sex and money is made also by Paul:

Fornication and impurity of any kind, or greed, must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints ... Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

– Ephesians 5:3,5 (also Colossians 3:5-6)

The Lord will see that we are given all the love and all the material possessions that we really need; that is, that we need to experience the intimacy of divine communion, to carry out the will of God, and to inherit the promise of eternal life. We are to place our trust in the Lord.

⁴Let marriage be held in honour by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers.

⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’

(Deuteronomy 31:6,8)

⁶So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?’(Psalm 118:6)

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

⁹Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them.

The focus of these three verses is Jesus Christ. Those who went before them spoke the word of God when they spoke to them of Jesus. It was in Jesus that they put their faith, and their heroic lives are a testimony to their faith. Jesus does not change. What these leaders taught them yesterday remains true today and will be true tomorrow. They must not allow themselves to be swept off course by the various strange teachings that are being aired among them.

Unlike Judaism, Christianity had no official protection under Roman law. It would seem that some among the Jewish Christians were suggesting a return to the practices of Judaism with its distinctive regulations governing food. Their only security, declares our author, is to be in Christ. Paul made the same point when he wrote: ‘The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 14:17). ‘Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do’ (1Corinthians 8:8). Paul also had to warn his readers against flirting with teaching that was not centred on Christ:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

– Colossians 2:6-8

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

– Ephesians 4:14-15

They are not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk.

– 1Timothy 1:4-6

Once again it is the sacrificial offering of blood on the day of atonement that provides our author with the imagery for what he wants to say about Jesus. The regulations covering the sacrifice forbade the priests to eat the bodies of the animals whose blood was taken into the sanctuary by the high priest:

No sin offering shall be eaten from which any blood is brought into the tent of meeting for atonement in the holy place; it shall be burned with fire.

– Leviticus 6:30

The bodies of the animals had to be treated as impure, by being taken outside the encampment far from any sacred place and destroyed:

The bull of the sin offering and the goat of the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be taken outside the camp; their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be consumed in fire.

– Leviticus 16:27

This is how they treated Jesus who offered himself, his own blood, to do what the sacrifice of the day of atonement was unable to do: gain for us ‘eternal redemption’ (9:12). He ‘removed sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (9:26). They cast him out of the city (Mark 15:20) to destroy him as something unclean. Rather than ‘seek ourselves’ in the promised security of observant Judaism, we must ‘take up our cross’ and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34). We must ‘go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured’. The way to ‘offer to God an acceptable worship’ (12:28) is to share in the life and worship of the new covenant community, sharing Jesus’ shame. Like Abraham we are to live here as strangers. Our city, our sanctuary, our sacrificial altar is where Jesus is, in heaven. Ours is a pilgrimage of faith. Our sacrifice is to be ‘a sacrifice of praise to God’ (Psalm 50:14). The ‘fruit of our lips’ (Hosea 14:2) is to be a life of self-giving in shared love (Greek: *koinōnia*, 13:16). The psalmist, like those to whom this oration is addressed, was in great distress. He called out to God and was heard and in his joy he prayed: ‘in the midst of the congregation I will praise you’ (Psalm 22:22). Our author placed these words on the lips of Jesus earlier (see 2:12). He calls us to do the same.

¹⁰We have a sacrificial altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat.

¹¹For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

¹²Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood.

¹³Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.

¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

¹⁵Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.

¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹⁷Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account.

Let them do this with joy and not with sighing — for that would be harmful to you.

¹⁸Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honourably in all things.

¹⁹I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you very soon.

²⁰Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

He referred earlier to the past leaders of the community who spoke the word of God to them and taught them to believe in Jesus (13:7). It is important that they ‘obey’ (Greek: *peithō*), that is to say, have the same trust in, their present leaders. In calling on them to submit (Greek: *hupēikō*) to these leaders, he does not use *hupotassō*. He is not focusing on observing the proper order, or keeping their proper place. Rather he is urging them to listen to the teaching of those who have won their trust, because they are ‘keeping watch over their souls’. He includes himself among them, asks for their prayers and assures them that he wants only what is best for them. He hopes to return to them soon.

Our author concludes his oration with a prayer to the ‘God of peace (see the commentary on 12:14) who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep.’ Isaiah sings of the redemption of Israel by God acting through Moses ‘the shepherd of his flock’ (Isaiah 63:11). Jesus is the ‘great’ shepherd who, as he has said on numerous occasions, by his own blood brought us an eternal redemption and realised for us the new, ‘eternal covenant’. There are echoes here of the promise of God made through the prophet Zechariah: ‘because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit’ (Zech 9:11).

The author prays that God will give them all the grace they need to do God’s will. The work of God has already been realised in Christ, but is yet to be realised in his disciples, and it is God who will make it possible for us to do what is pleasing in his sight. There are echoes here of Paul’s words in his letter to the Ephesians: ‘Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen’ (Ephesians 3:20-21).

He would prefer to deliver the oration himself, but as he cannot be with them at this time, he has written what he wants to say and is sending it to them. As the verb ‘appeal’ (Greek: *parakaleō*), and the related noun ‘exhortation’ (Greek: *paraklāsis*) indicate, he is conscious of relaying to them the call of the risen Christ (see 3:13).

He relays to them the good news that Timothy, who is obviously well-known to them, has been released. It would seem that he is on his way to join the author, and if he reaches him in time, they will come together to see the community.

One reading of the reference to ‘Italy’ is that the author is writing to a community in Italy (Rome?) and assures them that other Christians from their community who, like the author, are living outside Italy, join him in sending greetings. He prays that they may live in the grace of God.

²²I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

²³I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been set free; and if he comes in time, he will be with me when I see you.

²⁴Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy send you greetings.

²⁵Grace be with all of you.