*Good Jesus, Fountain of Love,*

*Fill us with thy love.*

*Absorb us into thy love;*

*Compass us with thy love,*

*That we may see all things in the light of thy love,*

*Receive all things as the token of thy love,*

*Speak of all things in words breathing of thy love,*

*Win through thy love others for thy love,*

*Be kindled day by day with a new glow of thy love,*

*Until we be fitted to enter into thine everlasting love,*

*To adore thy love and love to adore thee, our God and all.*

*Even so come, O Lord Jesus.\**

*In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.*

Good morning! Good morning at home!

Usually when we sit down and read one of Paul's letters, we can quickly detect his ardent dedication to the ongoing spiritual health of his brothers and sisters and Christ throughout the ancient churches. Many of the New Testament letters contain both joyful encouragement and impassioned correction. Some, like the letters to the Corinthians definitely lean toward the corrective side; we've talked before about how nuts things had gotten in Corinth.

But Philippians is a letter where there is a lot less corrective and a lot more encouragement. This is, after all, the letter, wherein Paul's opening address contains great and earnest joy. He greeted his friends by telling them that "in all his prayers for them, he always prayed with joy because of their partnership in the gospel." And as he closed out the letter, he exhorted his friends with some of the most beloved words of the entire Bible:

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

Again, despite the fact that Paul was in prison, he seemed like he was in a good mood as far as the Philippians were concerned.

But despite the overall positive vibe he had for the direction they were going as a church community, Paul still found reason to deploy some of his typically evocative language for those with whom he had some concerns. Today's lesson from the third chapter contains just that kind of language, leveraged against those that lived as enemies of the cross of Christ. In that third or so verse of the section we heard today, Paul drew a forceful comparison between his dear friends in Philippi and those so-called enemies. The overall group at Philippi, like Paul, were "pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus," and *with* Paul working towards spiritual maturity. But there were those others, those that were seeking to lead them astray, dogs and evil workers he called them at the top of the third chapter. "*Their* end is destruction," he wrote, and "their god is their belly."

And those four words, "their god is their belly," have stuck in my head over the past week as I thought about what Paul was getting at in our lesson. "What sort of god is a belly?" The question lingered for days and all that came to mind were bad jokes about how my belly god has been hard at work altering my clothes over the pandemic and making my clerical shirts smaller. But yesterday as I was listening to a Lenten talk about Biblical sacrifice and its relationship to the Eucharist, it hit me. The thing about a belly god is that like all gods, it commands worship. And once it starts to receive offerings, its truly insatiable. The god of the belly, it will never stop wanting, never stop commanding, never stop *demanding*, never stop taking what we give it. The god of the belly doesn't bless us, doesn't give a return. In fact, it exchanges the goods we offer it for waste. When Paul uses this figure of the god of the belly, he's not talking about overeating; he's talking about worshiping something besides God Almighty. He's almost talking about how those that live as the enemies of the cross are those that are fooled into making sacrifices to worship *themselves*, which is ultimately a truly fruitless proposition.

Contrast that with what we offer to God in Christ. Yes, we would offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Yes, we would offer our "bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God," as our "spiritual worship (as Paul wrote to the Romans." In Christ, we are meant to offer everything we are, everything we have to God, who created us and redeemed us. But when we make our offerings to our God, the maker of heaven and earth, He does not offer us back refuse or waste but life itself and life abundant. My professor said yesterday that sacrifices made to God Most High have a cost, but not loss. Again, when we give our lives to God, He gives us life, the true life of His Son, back in return.

The god of the belly can make no such claim. And by the way, I'm just using the Pauline figure here. We can use our imaginations and find all kinds of other weird gods we might make sacrifices to, and they all have to do with our vanities, self-obsessions, hopelessness, and lack of trust. We might run to these belly-type gods looking for quick comfort, hoping to receive momentary satisfaction for our wants, pains, and anxieties. But they will not give us what we need. They will only lead us, again, as Paul says, to destruction. Better for us to claim our home in Heaven. Better indeed that in Christ, we are heading towards the transformation of the shame and humiliation wrought by those false belly gods, heading towards being conformed to the body of Christ's glory.

Part of the Lenten process is to ask God to shine His righteous light on those things that might lead us away from him, from offering our lives to him so that he can give us His life back. We can and should prayerfully examine those aspects of our lives that have started to take the shape of a god of the belly. Again, it might actually be our belly, but then it might not. Whatever it is in our lives that we drop time, money, produce into, and does not offer us life back but rather pain and garbage: those things are what Paul would warn us about. That's why Lenten abstinences can lead us to greater spiritual health. And of course, once by grace we have rooted out those little spiritual black holes, God is ready to send the Holy Spirit to truly comfort us, truly bless us, truly love us in a way that no god of the belly could ever come close.

Therefore, this week I pray we take that spiritual inventory, placing our lives at the cross for God to clean up. I pray that in this second week of Lent, we might trust in God and more fully believe in His Word and work more dearly so that he will, like Abraham, account it as righteousness. And in or righteousness, may the world around us be moved to

*behold the fair beauty of the Lord \**

*and to seek him in his temple.*

To God be all glory; from age to age. Amen.