

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR—Year A

Of the various letters that have definitely come down to us from St. Paul himself, there is no doubt that the one to the Philippians is addressed to the community to which he felt most attached. Unlike the Corinthians, whom Paul had to correct quite harshly in his letters to them, the Philippians were basically receptive to his preaching and lived in accordance with it. This led Paul near the beginning of the letter to commend them in the following words: “I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil 1:3-5). Then, toward the end of the letter, he writes the verses that we just heard, including the following words: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and ... anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me” (Phil 4:8-9).

Now I dare say that words like those, referring to qualities like truth, honor, justice, purity, and the like, can easily pass us by without making much impression. Oh yes, we might think, we know all about that, but let’s hear something more practical, something with a little more bite to it, something like that passage in First Corinthians where Paul castigates that community for their selfish behavior when they come together for the breaking of the bread, with each one going ahead with his own supper, while one goes hungry and another gets drunk (1 Cor 11:21). Passages like that are obviously important too, but my main point that, in the long run, verses like those I quoted from Philippians are even more crucial for the way we live. I want to support this claim by referring to a very thought-provoking column by David Brooks that appeared in the *New York Times* a couple days ago and in which he referred to a much older

essay by Lewis Mumford published in 1940, when Europe was already at war and many in this country were arguing for strict isolation from that struggle.

These isolationists had a very pragmatic mind-set, assuming that civic life can best be lived without reference to issues of philosophical, theological, or literary depth. The core problem, Mumford argued, is that such pragmatists rely so closely, almost exclusively, on the natural and social sciences that they ignore the kinds of insight offered by philosophy, theology, and literature. They are inclined to apply economic remedies to non-economic actors, whereas “those who threaten civilization—Stalin then, Putin and ISIS now—are driven by moral zealotry and animal imperatives,” and against such individuals and groups, “economic sanctions won’t work.”¹ This helps explain why the people we revere as truly heroic are those who were willing to lay down even their lives for values that they knew in their bones were more important than themselves, people like Jesus, or Gandhi, or Oscar Romero. In Mumford’s words, “Bare life is worthless. Justice is worth fighting for; order is worth fighting for; culture ... is worth fighting for.” St. Paul would have phrased it somewhat differently, but he would absolutely have agreed with the thrust of that argument. If we are going to follow the admonition he gives to the Philippians—that we actually *do* what we have heard and seen in him—then it will mean living and acting with what David Brooks calls “a heart brimming with moral emotion,” a heart not blindly going along with “the crowd,” not thinking that just because a majority of a population approve of something and have even enshrined it in civil law it is therefore right, but rather, in Paul’s words, standing up for “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is gracious,” that is, filled with the grace of God. May our Eucharist this morning strengthen us in our resolve so to live.

1 David Brooks, "The Problem with Pragmatism" *New York Times*, October 3, 2014.