

In this morning's Epistle reading (I Timothy 1:15-17), St. Paul expresses to his protégé Timothy an understanding that we all are in the process of understanding and making real in our own lives as Christians. In verse 15, St. Paul writes, "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." One of the basic truths underlying our Faith [and the beliefs of most religious groups] is that we are sinners. As Christians, we readily acknowledge this - we are sinners. I would like us to consider 3 questions to further delve into what St. Paul is saying: 1) what does it really mean to be "a sinner"? 2) am I the chief sinner, as St. Paul said he was? 3) how do we see Christ's salvation (worked out) in the life of St. Paul?

I)
We say that we're sinners, but what does the Scripture and the Tradition of the Church understand this to mean? It doesn't simply mean that we've broken certain rules. That is part of it. But to be a sinner is not equal with being a law-breaker. The word sin - *amartia* (Greek) - means to miss the mark. The idea being that a goal exists, and anything less than perfectly attaining that goal would qualify for *amartia* (sin).

God created man with the goal being communion and life with God. We're created to enjoy the blessings that God pours out on us. But to enjoy these blessings presupposes a certain way of life. And so God gave to mankind laws, guidelines, so that we would walk along an appropriate path. The laws of God were never designed to restrict man and to make life miserable - we're created to enjoy life, and to live with God, and the laws of God preserve an environment where we can do that. So being sinners in a Christian understanding is not just the fact that laws are broken or boundaries are crossed. It's a much deeper and more devastating statement - to be a sinner is to be one who separates ourselves from the life and the love of God.

When we do things that are not consistent with God, the natural result is that we fall away from God, we place a barrier between the love of God and man. When I sin, the real tragedy is that I've turned my back on God. God isn't a judge looking then to punish the sinner; we often hear the language of medicine used here - that our sins plunge us into illness, we're sick and dying and God is the Great Physician looking to restore us to perfect health and life. As St. Paul writes, Christ came to save sinners, to be the Physician and to apply the salve of God's love and forgiveness to the wounds caused by our sins.

II)
But St. Paul not only recognizes himself as a sinner, but he ends this specific verse by saying, "of whom I am chief." He calls himself the first among sinners. This isn't hyperbole, it's not a dramatic overstatement by St. Paul. He says it because he feels it; he believes as he stands a new man in Christ before God the Father, he believes that he had been the worst of all sinners, and Christ still offered him redemption. St. Paul was a persecutor of the Christian Church, and that's a terrible sin. But St. Paul doesn't call himself the chief among sinners

because of any specific act. He calls himself the chief of sinners, because as Christ says, if we've committed one sin, then we're guilty of them all. He recognizes that he's guilty of all sins, he's guilty of an enormous separation from God, and how could he not see himself as the first of all sinners with this recognition?

And this is a realization that we're all moving toward, as Christians. We use this phrase from St. Paul to refer to ourselves in our prayers. Before coming to communion, we say..."I believe, O Lord, and I confess that thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, who camest into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first." And in our morning and evening prayers, we pray these same words, or some with the same meaning. Again, we not speaking these words symbolically - we're repeating them daily so slowly we can recognize that we are the chief among sinners. Our sins were responsible for the death of Christ. And eventually, we won't even think, "my sins and everyone else's sins," but we'll think only of our sins, of our failings, our separation from the love of God caused by our sins. And the knowledge of our separation from God will also help us say with total conviction, that we are the chief among sinners.

III)

St. Paul does say in this verse, that even though he's the chief of sinners, that Christ has offered him salvation. He doesn't deserve it, and the reason he gives for his own salvation (in the next verse) is so that the rest of the world could see by his example - God saved even Paul, therefore Christ really came to save all mankind. We see the results of "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners" very vividly in the life of St. Paul. He totally changed. His life became about Christ, sharing, preaching, teaching, calling others to experience the love of God in the same way he experienced it. St. Paul stopped persecuting the Church and became one of Her chief Apostles - and eventually he even suffered martyrdom in Rome for the sake of Christ. He was a new man, totally transformed and transfigured by Christ. And this is what he preached - Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

This same totally transfiguring salvation is what Christ offers to us, and to everyone around us. We're here to participate in the life and the love of God, and to preach it and to share it with others. Christ came to save us from sin, to save us from eternity separated from God. Christ came to restore to us the purpose for our existence. The effects and the results of sin we still see in the world - people get sick, they die, horrible crimes happen, all of the evil that existed before Christ still exists in the world after Christ. But we don't have to be part of spreading that evil. We'll still feel it's effects - but we don't have to be part of destroying humankind and all that God has created by our sin. Christ comes to save us from this, and to offer us a different life - a life of love, of communion with God and our fellow man. Christ fulfilled all it means to be human, and we're offered the chance to share in that now, and unto all ages.

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!