

## Homily Trinity 8

From the Second Lesson:

“Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs or thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”

Homily:

“By their fruits ye shall know them.”

In other words, actions speak louder than words or appearances. Despite the onset of colorful words, beguiling smiles, flashy clothes or a stuffed wallet, if one looks closely, they will see the true story. None of those things matter at all when you stand before God.

We live today in a world packed with spokesmen, experts and various prophets of one thing or another, each claiming to have the inside track to fortune, to living a better life, to happiness and to commanding the respect of all those around us. Even “ministers” have gotten into the act, announcing with swagger and confidence that God wants them to drive a newer, bigger car, have glorious favor in their life, and that all we need to do to get God to love us too is to open our wallets and send them some money or support their ministry. We don’t even need to be present, we can go online and send our contribution.

We have entire denominations that have simply abandoned Scripture, apparently deciding that what God said was just not politically correct enough, or progressive enough, or personally profitable enough for them to follow.

Today's Gospel reading is a warning against false prophets, who teach false doctrine, and make false claims in the name of God. Our Lord warns us of these people, and of the danger they pose to our souls. They are known for teaching things that are contrary to God's word and will and deceive us.

Those that pretend to be teachers and prophets but who teach false doctrine are what our Lord would call "wolves in sheep's clothing,". Wolves, we know, sneak by cover into the midst of the flock under pretense of being safe, but they intend evil and destruction. These "wolves" may manage to sneak amongst us by their impressive appearance, or their skillful and manipulative use of words. They may seem innocent, harmless, even useful, only later to turn out to be deceptive and capable of much destruction.

They can not only destroy the faith of individuals, but they can tear apart the communities of God's people. Saint John says that when these evil ones come, the sheep are scattered, driven from each other and from God. They try to destroy any community that might protect the flock and leave each individual alone and defenseless.

How many of you can think of situations in which you have seen this destruction at work? How many of you can recall a situation in which some person has come in and begin immediately to tear people apart, to spread falsehoods, to damage relationships and even to destroy entire groups?

Satan is a cruel and cunning foe, taking every opportunity to damage us. We must always be on guard. Using the illustration of the fruit of the tree, our Lord tells us how we can steel ourselves from this temptation.

First, ignore the bark and the leaves of the growing tree. Those are merely coverings, like fancy clothes. Focus instead on the fruit of the tree. What does it actually produce? Men may adopt a false outward appearance, but they cannot produce other than that which they are. The fruit is according to the tree. A thorn bush cannot produce grapes, though you might find a grape hanging in a thorn bush. The thistle cannot produce figs. Corrupted people are like thorns and thistles. They cannot produce that which is not their nature.

This is not to suggest that God cannot change a person. Certainly, the master gardener can graft to the old tree the makings of the new and productive branch. But the tree itself cannot do this work. From evil will come evil, and from good will come good. A good tree—as a good person—cannot bring forth bad fruit. It is not in their nature, any more than it is the nature of the bad tree to bring forth good fruit.

To know whether a man be good or evil, then, we examine his words and actions. “By their fruits shall ye know them.”

Watch what he actually does—how he lives—how he speaks. False prophets tell lies, make promises and mislead. True prophets tell the truth and do not mis-lead, but rather lead. In our Lord’s day, scribes and Pharisees taught the law but did not apply it to themselves. They routinely violated the standards of God; they were proud, covetous and harsh rather than being humble, honest and generous.

See what doctrine those who would be prophets espouse and what they do in their actions. Is it of God, or of man? God’s doctrines lead to humility, charity, loving-kindness, generosity, holiness and grace. Pay attention to the results of the doctrines of the prophets and teachers. Are they the desired ends of our Lord? Do they respect the plainly stated Scriptural standards? Some of the false prophets of our day love to say that they are “modernizing the faith in modern times,” but did

they ask God first, or simply listen to their own voices? Do the false prophets encourage these things?

They say they are “tearing down old structures” and “rejecting old worn-out standards”, but they fail to remember that the structures and standards they are rejecting are God’s. We can imagine them at the Day of Judgment, trying to explain why they thought they knew better than God and how their actions were justified.

If the tree is good, then it will produce good fruit. If a man is following the laws of God, he cannot help but to do good works. It is not the works that make the man good; we cannot do any good by ourselves, but only by the grace of God. But if we follow the grace of God, we move away from evil.

So too a prophet or teacher: if he follows the doctrines of the Gospel, he will deliver sound doctrine. He will deliver truth and inspiration to those who hear him. The false prophet or teacher, who follows some other doctrine, cannot deliver truth. His teaching will be false, as will his doctrine, and will do evil to those who hear him. He can do nothing else.

If such people pretend to speak for God, but their lives and actions speak otherwise, then they are false prophets; as St. John warned us, “the truth is not in them.” They may dress in fine clothes, but if their doctrines are false, then they are corrupt trees that can bring forth only evil fruit.

Once again, “ye shall know them by their fruits.” A man’s works tell if he is inwardly corrupt or pure. They are the “confession of his heart.” The Scriptures, properly understood, tell one consistent story of God’s relationship to and demands upon humankind. If any teach anything which is opposed to the Gospel, then they struggle to deceive.

Our Lord has told us how to judge and we were given this warning: that the false prophet, like the unfruitful tree, will be cast into the fire. “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven...”

What every man actually does is the fruit of his tree: “By their fruit shall ye know them.”

Let us pray.

Guide us, O Lord, to always seek wisdom in Your word, example in Your life, guidance in Your will, and grace from Your Holy Spirit. Help us always to be the good tree, so that we bear good fruit. As we acknowledge You to be our Lord, so take over our lives that we may always be fruitful servants. Grant this for the sake of our only Advocate and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen