

I have a number of tomato plants that I have started for this year, and they're growing very nicely inside. You would think that being inside would be the perfect place for a plant to grow. After all, it's a perfect environment, right? You have all the light you need. You have all the water that you need. You have no harsh weather to deal with, because there's no wind and anything like that. No animals to contend with. Nothing. You would think that a plant started inside would do just fine once it got outside.

But we all that that's not the truth, is it? A plant grown inside in this sheltered, protected environment is not going to do very well if it's just thrown outside. It will immediately wither and die, because it's not used to the reality that it has to face. It's not used to the wind and the weather and all of the dangers it has to deal with. And so in order to get a plant ready to go outside, you have to harden it, right? You have to take it outside for a little bit and bring it back in and so on and so forth over the course of a week or so, until the plant is finally ready to be outside on its own where it will finally thrive in the environment that it's meant to be.

Christians, faith is the same way. Because when God first gives us faith, we are like a plant that is grown inside. We are sheltered to some degree, yes, because God makes it that way. Because if we were thrown into the world as it is and all the temptations that we have to face, we would immediately wither and fail. Our faith would not be able to stand the test. And so the question that we have to face today, Christians, is how does God prepare us for the temptations which are to come? How does God harden us, so to speak, like a plant, so that we are able to be Christians even in the face of adversity?

And that's what we see going on with the apostles in our Gospel reading for today. Because when we meet the apostles in chapter 15 and 16 in the Gospel of John, they are fearful, fearful and weak in their faith. They haven't had much time with Jesus, and so they're not ready for the temptations that they have to face. Think of how often they fail in the Gospels. Every time we meet the disciples, they're always misunderstanding Jesus or they're always running away when they should be staying near. Right after John chapter 16, when Jesus goes and suffers, all of his apostles will desert him because of the weakness of their faith.

And Jesus is telling them, here in John chapter 16, that things are only going to get worse, not better. He says, "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God." They thought they had it hard now. Jesus says the time will come when they will be thrown out by their own people. It'd be one thing if the Gentiles were the ones persecuting them. They could probably deal with that pretty easily. But the reality is that they would suffer persecution from their own people, sometimes from their own families. People who would kill them and imprison them and do anything that they could to silence the message of the Gospel. And how hard would that be for them to bear, having to deal with that rejection from the Jews!

Christians, do we not also face a world which is becoming increasingly more difficult for us to bear? It could be from our own families, people who we know and love, who just don't want to hear the Gospel. But it could also be from the nation, a nation which seems to have less and less time for hearing the Gospel. A nation which increasingly says things like Christians are just out of touch. They give ideas that are dangerous for society. A child raised in the Christian faith will not be ready for society. At least that's what they say these days even at the very highest levels of education. It is a world which wants less and less and less to do with the Gospel. How will we stand in the face of that opposition? How will we be able to withstand being out in a world which hates Jesus?

Jesus gives us the answer here in our reading, just as he gave the answer to his apostles. The way that

they would be able to stand is because he has told them exactly what is going to happen before it does. This is what Jesus says: "But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you." And he also says, "I have said all these things to keep you from falling away." So because they have Jesus' own word of what's going to happen to them, they won't be caught by surprise. They know that it's going to happen, and therefore they will not stumble and fall.

And Christians, that is the answer for us, too, this day. The way that we are built up so that we can withstand all assaults of the world and whatever temptation might come--because temptation will come, Christians. You can count on it. Things are not going to get easier. Things will only get harder for us as Christians. But the way that we will be able to stand in that day of trial is by being in the very Word of God. Because when we are in the Word, we have a sure foundation. When we are in the Word, we are being built up. The Bible even says trained for righteousness. We are like soldiers preparing for battle. We are like athletes training to compete. And the way that we train in our faith is through this living Word, the very words of Jesus which have given us life and will continue to give us life in the days ahead.

So when we are in this Word, Christians, we don't have to worry or wonder. Because this Word has the power to transform. Just look at the apostles. They were the ones who were so afraid, who were always questioning, who were always wondering, who had so little faith. And yet when we meet them in book of Acts, we meet men ready to stand against anything, men who continued to proclaim Jesus even in prison. And all of the apostles, with the exception of John, were tortured horribly for their faith. And yet not one of them wavered, because they had this sure Word from their Lord Jesus Christ, this Word which built them up and prepared for the battle.

So Christians, let us be in this Word, however it comes to us: in the Bible, when we hear it, in the Sacraments, whatever it might be. Let us receive this Word, because it is a mighty weapon in our hands. It is the very means by which we will extinguish all temptations. And whatever you might be facing as a Christian--grief, persecution, whatever it might be--when we are in the Word, God has given to us a sure and certain confidence so that we will be able to stand, having been trained in righteousness.

And even more than that, too, we have the Holy Spirit, who is called quite appropriately the Helper, the one who helps us in our weakness. So that when we are not able to stand, God stands within us and fires us for the fight so that we will persevere in the face of all opposition.

So Christians, come. Let us be in this Word. Take up the sword of the Spirit. It is your life and the means by which we will be trained in righteousness, prepared for the battle which is ahead, knowing that God has fought and overcome and that we have the victory in Jesus Christ.

To him be power and glory, now and forever. Amen.