

Quinquagesima
3 March, Anno Domini 2019
St. Luke 18:31-43
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

It was time. Jesus' last and greatest procession to the holy city had begun. There would be no more crisscrossing Israel preaching, teaching, healing, and slipping through the fingers of the Jews. Every step was one step closer to the fulfillment of God's Word to Adam and Eve as they stood in shame before Him in Eden. "I will save you. I will crush this serpent's ugly, venomous head. I will draw out the poison of sin which has infected you and all your children after you. And I will do this myself because you cannot pay the price. I will become man and I will drink the devil's poison to the very last bitter dregs. Satan will kill me. He will raise up blasphemies and lies and every manner of evil and hatred against me. He will lash out with every ounce of his fiery hot rage. All of hell will be released against me. I myself will bear the entirety of my own wrath against your sin. And then, having conquered death I will rise from the dead and pour out my Spirit upon the earth that you may live, that you too may leave your graves and death behind."

The disciples shouldn't have been surprised by what Jesus said. The Jews shouldn't have been surprised. God's people should have been looking for exactly Jesus, God in the flesh, who came in weakness and humility to bear our sin and our sorrows, to be lifted up above the earth, cursed on behalf of all people. That's what the prophets had been proclaiming. So why the confusion?

Because that's not what we want. We don't want the death of Jesus because His death means our death - death to sin and evil desires, death to our righteousness, death to our pride and wisdom. Our flesh is constantly looking for something else. Maybe it's more exciting. Maybe it's easier. Maybe it's something that makes us look a little better. Maybe it's just something more immediate. The problem is that we are so often blinded to what we actually need. Even from one day to the next, from one hour to the next, we become distracted and confused. We think that the temporary discomfort and suffering we endure in the flesh is what really ails us. We think "If only I didn't have so many hard decisions to make. If only I didn't have so many unfinished projects. If only my job paid more. If only my kids were more obedient. If only our government was better. If only I could get better about dieting and exercise. If only I didn't have so many health problems." And we imagine that accomplishing any of those things will finally bring peace to our lives.

But these are empty distractions that the devil uses to keep our eyes darkened and confused and unable to find true joy in Christ. All those things could be taken care of and we'd be no better off. Sure, we know the story and even the facts about why Jesus came and died. That's the easy part. But just knowing facts will only help you pass a test. Even the demons know the facts. That doesn't help them. The disciples knew the facts. Jesus had just laid out the program about as clearly as He possibly could. "Hey guys, listen up. What I'm about to say is REALLY important. When we get to Jerusalem I'm going to be arrested, tried, treated terribly and murdered. Then, on the third day, I am going to rise from the dead." Blank stares.

This should have caused great joy for the disciples. It should cause us great joy every time we hear it and meditate upon it. It should comfort us in the midst of every affliction and every trial every day. It should cause unrestrained prayer and praises to come pouring out of our mouths. But unless we believe that all Christ's work was done for us and for our salvation, we will forever be stumbling about. That's the whole reason Christ continues to call us to together - to proclaim to us His cross and empty tomb, to soak us in the promises of Holy Baptism, to place into our mouths the victory of His death. He wants you to hear this Gospel all the days of your life. He wants you to believe it and find joy and comfort in it.

If there were something better or more that He could give or do for you that would be more helpful and bring more hope and comfort than His death and resurrection, you can be sure He would do it. But there simply isn't. He could take away all your temporary trials. He could heal you perfectly right now. But then what? If that is all Christ does, if all we hope to get from Jesus is a little momentary relief, then we are to be most pitied and we have cheapened the person and work of our Lord. At that point we are like the Jews and the disciples and those who wanted nothing more from Jesus than full bellies and we are utterly blind to our need for the monumental work of Jesus Christ. Death would still remain. It would still be hanging over us in the end and there would be nothing we could do about it. We would be lost forever, condemned under the weight of our guilt, doomed to suffer eternal judgment in the fires of hell. We would be like the rich man who had all the good he would ever have in this life.

Instead, Christ loved you. Instead, He turned His face toward Jerusalem. Instead, Christ has swallowed up death. Instead, the guilt of all your sins was laid upon Him so that He might bear its punishment; so that the wrath of God could be poured out upon Him instead of you. Jesus didn't assume our human nature simply to prune away a few branches of our troubles. He came to destroy the root of all sadness, all sickness, all confusion, all division. To do that He had to go to Jerusalem and be rejected by man and by God. He had to suffer the indignation and the humiliation of the cross. Jesus came to restore you to God, that as the Baptized, you may joyfully and confidently call God Abba. Father. In all times of joy and all times of sorrow and despair, because Jesus shed His Blood, every sinner is invited to believe that God's wrath has been turned away, that their afflictions are not the chastisements of an angry God who is eager to destroy us as He is fully justified in doing. This is not how God would have you know Him. He would have you know Him only in Jesus, His beloved Son, who was offered up as Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus Christ crucified is the only way you can rightly know the true love of God for you.

But if we try to look at God apart from Jesus Christ and Him crucified, we will only know God's judgement and wrath. If we try to know God by the level of comfort and ease in this life, we will find no comfort or use for Good Friday and Easter. If we try to know God by our own self-made righteousness, we will know only terror and uncertainty because our righteousness is no righteousness at all. This is the greatest blindness that will cause us to stumble right into hell. This is the darkness which Satan would fill your eyes with.

On the other hand, all who behold in the humble Jesus of Nazareth who marches steadily and purposefully to Jerusalem to suffer such utter shame and disgrace, all who behold by faith and believe that this man is none other than the Son of David, the Messiah, will know a peace that

endures even in the most turbulent and hopeless of times. Like your Lord, because in Him you know and are sure of the love of your Heavenly Father, not even death is a source of dread for you. It is only a sweet slumber that will have its end. If your sin is paid for (and it is) and if death is but the entrance to eternal life with Christ for those who believe (and it is), then there is nothing in this world that you need to fear. Truly. Not your sin. Not the raging of the world. Not sickness or famine or nakedness or sword. Your crosses and afflictions are not punishment, but the gentle disciplining of your Father who has promised to work your eternal good through them, no matter how hard Satan tries to use them to harm you. You can actually receive them patiently with joy because you know that through them, through you, God will bring glory to His Name.

The great irony of Jericho that day was that the blind man is the only one who could see. He believed Jesus was the Messiah because he saw Jesus with His ears. He knew on the basis of what had been told to him about this Jesus, that Jesus of Nazareth had come from God to have mercy on all who suffer under sin's affliction, be it in mind, in body, or in soul. The blind man prayed the true prayer, the prayer that can only be born of faith, the prayer which calls upon God to have mercy, knowing full well that mercy is the very thing which God takes the greatest pleasure in giving.

Beginning this Wednesday, we will begin again our Lenten journey with Jesus. Very fittingly, the theme will be "Behold, the Man." May God the Holy Spirit grant that, like the blind man, we may see Jesus clearly as the Son of God who has come to suffer and die and rise for our salvation. And may we, with eager hearts, hear this good news as often as it is proclaimed, repent of our sins, and come to receive the redemption of Christ's cross as He gives it to us as true food in the Holy Supper of His Body and Blood.

In the Name of +Jesus