

Sure Signs

In the name of him who was sent that the world might be saved through him, dear friends in Christ: “He came to his own, and his own received him not.” So, writes the Apostle John in the first chapter of his Gospel. And it’s generally true. Near the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was rejected by the people of his hometown Nazareth. Later, at the end of his ministry, he was rejected and condemned by the religious leaders and by the crowd at his trial. Ultimately, he was largely rejected and continues to be hated even today by the majority of those who share his Jewish blood and heritage. And high on the list of those who hated him most while he walked this earth were the Pharisees.

And that should strike us at odd. The Pharisees, after all, were nearly fanatical about their approach to the faith. They constantly poured over the sacred Scriptures and were forever feverishly studying the commentaries on them by all famous rabbis. They of all people most eagerly looked forward to the appearing of the promised Messiah and the kingdom of God he would usher in. Most of all they were devoted to doing everything within their power to hasten the day of the Messiah’s appearing by keeping and perfectly obeying the whole Law of God.

Their problem was that they thought they’d achieved success. In their minds they *were* keeping the Law of God complete and undefiled. They *were* righteous in the sight of man and of God. And so when first John the Baptizer and then Jesus after him came along proclaiming a message of repentance and Baptism for the forgiveness of sin, they couldn’t see how it applied to them. Sure, notorious public sinners like criminals, tax collectors, and prostitutes need to repent, as do most of our countrymen who only try to keep the law in a sort of half-hearted way. Come to think of it, there’re a few Pharisees among us who aren’t nearly as scrupulous as they should be – the hypocrites! But the rest of us? Why do we need to repent?

But this Jesus keeps gathering momentum. He’s traveling all over the country teaching in the synagogues. And he’s a captivating speaker, no one denies that. He really seems to know his stuff. And wherever he goes he leaves a crowd of healed people in his wake; cripples, lepers, paralytics, blind, deaf, mute – you name it: all are restored to full health by his touch. In these regards at least, he seems to fit the description of the Messiah.

In other ways, definitely not. He associates with sinners. He violates the Sabbath and encourages his disciples to do the same. He has no respect for our sacred traditions. He openly criticizes many of them. And conversations between Jesus and the Pharisees have not gone at all well. Surely, Messiah, when he appears, will praise us for our efforts to prepare his way through our being living examples to the nation of the righteousness that God’s Law demands. Instead this Jesus calls us white-washed tombs that look good on the outside but that are filled on the inside with death and decay. The insult is too great to bear. For most of the Pharisees these are sure signs that Jesus is not a true man of God, much less the promised Messiah. For them he’s a hack, a faker, a pretender; a pest who needs to be destroyed.

But not all of the Pharisees are on the same page in this regard. A few are not entirely blinded by hatred to see that the miraculous works performed by Jesus cannot be ignored. To them these are sure signs that Jesus is indeed a genuine man of God. But that confounds them. How can someone doing such mighty works of God be opposed to people like us who are also devoted to doing the works of God? It makes no sense. And so it is that Nicodemus, a

spokesman for these few stumped Pharisees, comes to Jesus at night to investigate him further, and hopefully get the answer to this profound mystery.

He begins by paying Jesus what he believes to be a high compliment. He calls him “Rabbi” which means “Great One”. It’s a title reserved for those who have studied for many years at the highest levels. It’s akin to calling someone “Doctor”. And Nicodemus is no doubt aware that Jesus has had no formal education beyond what we would call grade school. He tells Jesus, “We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

It’s an opening that Jesus exploits. You admit that I’m a teacher sent by God. My miraculous signs that you’ve seen tell you that, do they? Okay, then let me teach you. “Truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

It’s the last thing Nicodemus expected to hear. Jesus is essentially saying that Nicodemus is a spiritual blind man. You think you can see what God is doing through me; but you can’t. Meanwhile Nicodemus is wondering, “Born again? What’s that? Sounds painful.” He asks, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” That sure doesn’t sound possible. And I’m guessing that all mothers would gladly agree.

Jesus clarifies: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” He’s talking about Baptism – the sign that’s more than a sign which the Pharisees had rejected. Baptism is the sign that God’s work of bringing sinners to repentance has been done. It’s the sign that the Holy Spirit has convicted the sinner of his guilt and shown him his need to be saved. And it’s the sure sign that God receives the repentant and forgives them, washing away their guilt by water and the Word.

What Jesus is doing is opening the eyes of Nicodemus to see the sure signs that he’s been blind to all his life: the signs of his own sin. He has to start there. Everyone must start there. Jesus came to redeem sinners. The righteous need not apply. But there are none righteous; no not one. There are only those who think they are righteous – which is proof that they are full of sinful pride, that they see themselves as better than others, and that they sit in judgment of them. They place themselves in the role of God. Thus, they are idolaters of the self.

And I’ve said it before: there’s a Pharisee in each one of us. We’re forever counting up our good works as if they carried merit before God. We’re constantly justifying our behavior. We cleverly hide our selfish thoughts and pretend that they don’t exist. We sit and make judgments about others, considering ourselves better and more worthy. We too are idolaters of the self. The sure signs are all there. Jesus is calling Nicodemus to see those signs and to repent. And through Nicodemus, he’s calling you to repent as well. How appropriate for the penitential season of Lent.

But having called Nicodemus (and us) to repent, Jesus points ahead to another sure sign: the sign of our salvation in him. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” He recalls the incident in the time of the Exodus when God’s people grumbled against him in self-righteous fury about a brief delay on the way. The Lord sent them some attitude adjustment in the way of venomous snakes with an extremely painful bite. They cried out to the Lord to have the snakes taken away. But the Lord didn’t remove the snakes. Instead he had Moses make a bronze

serpent and put it up on a pole. All anyone who was bitten had to do was to look at the snake and they were cured.

It was a picture. It showed how we are all dying of the deadly venom of sin. The Lord doesn't take that sin away in this life. Instead he puts up a sure sign that saves us from our sin. He gives us his Son. He makes him who knew no sin to become sin for us. He raises him up on the cross. And he tells us, "Look at this!" This is the sure sign of my love for you. This is the sure sign by which you are forgiven. This is the sign that you will live forever. "For thus God loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Nicodemus later saw that sign. He was present at the crucifixion of Jesus and was a witness of his death. He helped Joseph of Arimathea take the Lord's bloody corpse down from the cross and place it in the tomb. He saw the sure sign, and he believed. And through him we see it too. And we believe unto life eternal through Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!