

### ***The Glory of the Cross***

In the name of him who is making peace for us by the blood of his cross, dear friends in Christ: As I mentioned before the service, today, the last Sunday in the Church Year, called the Sunday of Fulfillment, is sometimes also celebrated as the Sunday of Christ the King. Whatever we call it, though, the main thrust of it is the same. Here at the end, we look forward to the end of all things – to the final victory. We are reminded that in the end God wins. Creation is restored. Satan and his evil angels are dispatched once and for all to Hell – together with the wicked and unfaithful – never to trouble us again. Meanwhile saints in glory as well as the faithful who are still living at that time inherit the new heaven and the new earth. We live and reign with Christ our King forever and ever, never again experiencing sorrow, pain, or loss. It's the time and state of being we're all looking forward to with earnest hope and grateful expectation. And we know that we owe it all to Jesus our Lord and Savior.

How strange, then, that today's Gospel is not one of those bright and cheery texts that describes that glorious reign of Christ or the endless joy of the redeemed – what with choirs of heavenly angels and songs of praise being offered by multitudes of white robed saints to Jesus who sits on the throne. No, instead we have a text that sounds better suited for Good Friday, the darkest and most sorrowful day of the Church year. Instead of praise and honor being offered to Jesus, we see him being abused, ridiculed, put to death; his throne a roughly hewn instrument of torture, his only crown made of thorns. It hardly seems a fitting image to place before our eyes on the Sunday we celebrate Christ the King. At least, that's what one might think at first glance; but I hope to show you that upon deeper reflection, it's exactly the way we want to see and to worship Christ our King.

How's that? Well, first it's imperative to understand that even now our Lord Jesus is reigning in heaven above. That's the way those who have passed on into glory see him: in the fullness of his majesty and power. Ah, but here on earth we do not yet see that glory. It is, as yet, hidden from our eyes. And *hidden* is the operative word. In this world we walk by faith, not by sight. We hold things to be true that we cannot see, things that cannot be proven by scientific inquiry and observation. And Christ *has* a kingdom here on this earth where he rules – though it is not a kingdom *of* this world. It too is hidden. It doesn't have borders or a capital city. It doesn't occupy a particular piece of real estate. No, here on earth the kingdom of Christ is his Church, which is not a building or even all the places where he is worshipped combined together; but rather it is the sum total of all those who trust in Jesus for their salvation and who, by the power of his Spirit which fills them, give him their glad adoration and willing service.

Christ rules over us in his Church not with legal authority like an earthly government with the power to reward those who are loyal and punish those who are not, and certainly not with compelling force like a dictator whose commands we must obey—or else. Rather Jesus Christ rules over us in his Church by the humble preaching of his cross and passion. That's it: nothing more. That's how he reveals himself to us – that's how he wants us to see him: in the veiled glory of the cross where he hangs for us battered and beaten, cursed by God, and despised and rejected by the world.

Why? Because that's where and how he won our victory; the blood he shed on the cross is our guarantee that the glory we do not yet see will be ours one day. So while it's nice to

think ahead about the glory to be revealed, for the time being Jesus directs our attention to the battle already won. He wants us to focus on the hidden glory of the cross.

And no, the world at large doesn't understand it – just as the vast majority of those who there when it happened and actually saw it did not understand. Take for example the soldiers who were there. They mocked and ridiculed him, giving him vinegar to drink – which only exacerbated his thirst and added to his suffering. Though their own leader, Pontius Pilate, had ordered the placard above his head to declare, "This is the King of the Jews", none of them believed it. To them it was a joke. They demanded a sign – one which they did not expect to see. "If you really are the King of the Jews, well, then come down from there and save yourself." And so also today, there are those who mock Christians for their faith. To them what we believe is a joke. They tell us, "Now, if God would were to give me a sign – make some miracle happen, well then sure I'd believe"; but they say this knowing very well that they'll get no sign. What they fail to understand is that the cross itself is the sign. The words written above his head declare the truth: *this is the King*. And God so loved the world that he gave this King, his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. But they don't see it.

And neither did the vast majority of the people who we are told stood by watching. These weren't actively attacking Jesus; they were more the wait and see type. They'd heard his claims. They knew what people were saying about him. Maybe they'd even listened to some of his teaching. But they weren't about to make any commitments. Some of these find their modern-day counterparts in people who call themselves agnostics. They always demand more proof. They don't want to *believe* anything; they want to know. And until such time they can actually see something – something really convincing – they're not going to believe. The trouble is that it wouldn't really make any difference how much proof they got, because at some point they'd still have to cross over to faith in something they can't see. And the truth is that what they really have faith in is their own wisdom and the power of their critical discernment. Say it another way: they're too smart to believe – which sounds an awful lot like pride to me. This pride keeps them from seeing the true glory of the cross, and will keep them from doing so until the end when Christ's glory is revealed in its fullness; but then it will be too late.

But there's another kind of uncommitted onlooker in the crowd. These are the ones who had some closer association with Jesus. Perhaps they followed him here from Galilee, or were part of the crowd that hailed him as King on Palm Sunday – just a few days earlier. Now they're not so sure. They've discovered that being a follower of Jesus is a lot more costly than they imagined, and so they too have adopted a wait and see attitude. These find their counterparts today in what we would call fair weather and nominal Christians. The former are all for Jesus when things are going well; but they renounce any association with him when there's any pressure or cost connected to it. The latter come around for Christmas Eve and Easter services (maybe) or they confess that old standard line, "Well, my folks were members of a church once ... I think maybe they still are; that sort of makes me a Christian, doesn't it? And how dare you imply otherwise!" Such as these are too fearful or spiritually lazy to see the glory of the cross.

And there are others who do not see it for different reasons. There are the women of Jerusalem weeping and wailing for Jesus. They seem to be on his side. They realize that a terrible injustice is being done. Mean people are doing bad things to Jesus – an innocent man. It breaks their hearts. But sympathizers don't get it. Jesus told the women of Jerusalem that their concerns were misdirected. "Don't weep for me; but for yourselves and for your children." Jesus did not come to be an object of pity. He came because we were the objects of *his* pity.

He looked down upon us with compassion, and by going to the cross he was doing what he came to do to save us. Earlier Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem because of its unbelief – because he knew that the majority of the people there would ultimately reject him. Then he issued a solemn warning about how he tried to gather them up and rescue them; but they had refused to come to him. The inevitable result would be their destruction. What I'm saying, though, is that pitying Jesus is a seemingly sympathetic way to miss the point and fail to see the glory of the cross. I remember several years back when the film *The Passion of the Christ* was released. A lot of people who saw it were deeply moved and wept at the graphic scenes of Jesus being whipped and crucified. And certainly some tears were appropriate: tears of sorrow for your sin, for example, knowing that he suffered for your sake; and tears of gratitude for what he endured to save us. But tears of pity are different. To be sure, they are understandable – it's awful to see anyone suffer so; but such tears miss the point. By them those who observe Christ's passion mentally put themselves on his side. They say to Jesus, "I would never be part of making you suffer so. If I'd been there, I would have helped you if I could"; which is another way of saying "I'm one of the good guys. I don't need you to be a Savior for my sin."

And neither did the religious leaders who were there when Christ was crucified. What's odd about them is that they should have known better than anyone what was going on. They were the ones closest to God's Word. It was they who taught the people and who offered the sacrifices for sin. They even admit that Jesus saved others. They didn't deny his miracles – that he healed people from all manner of diseases, that he freed them from demons, and that he raised the dead. They knew he was a savior. And for that reason they should have known from Isaiah's prophecy that the Lord's Christ would save his people from their sin by bearing it for them and suffering and dying in their place. But they didn't see it. They couldn't. They were blind to it. Why? It's because they had adopted what we call a theology of glory. It's a view that associates only good things with God's faithful. It says that if you do what's right, if you try to keep God's commands, then everything will come up roses for you. This is how they accounted for their own high place in society and their wealth. "God is rewarding us for our obedience. God only punishes evil doers." Jesus had the temerity to challenge them. He called them hypocrites – sinners like everyone else. And *that* they could not abide. They had to attack and destroy him if they could. And that Jesus was allowed to suffer was proof to them that he couldn't be the Christ, which is why they hurled it at him: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One." Thus they unwittingly performed their role as priests, offering up the Sacrifice for sin without seeing the glory of the cross – that Jesus was indeed God's Chosen One suffering for the sins of the world.

Not surprisingly, the same blindness pervades much of modern Christianity. It's the false gospel proclaimed by health and welfare preachers and the ever popular Robert Schuller and Joel Osteen. The fact is that they don't know what to do with the cross. They never talk about it. They can't make it fit, because suffering has no place in their theology. Instead they keep saying that God only wants to bless you and make you happy. He wants everything to be well with you – for you to have your best life now; he only allows trouble and hardship to come upon those whose thoughts aren't positive enough. When bad things happen to them, they are reaping the negativity they sowed. But the point is that there is never any talk of sin or the need for a Savior – and that's why they can't see the glory of the cross or God's good purposes in causing suffering to come into the lives of his faithful.

That brings us to the last firsthand observers of Christ's crucifixion: the two with the best view: those who were crucified with him. Other Evangelists tell us that initially at least the two joined in mocking Jesus. But pain and the grim reality of death over whose threshold they were precariously dangling changed their tunes. Suffering and the threat of death have ways of doing

that. What's interesting is that they both want Jesus to save them. The difference is that one wants to be saved for this life; the other wants to be saved for the next. One wants to avoid death and go on living as he has been. He doesn't admit his guilt or his sin. He loves his life in this world, and for that reason he is bound to lose it. The other acknowledges his sin and the justice of his death. He hates his life in this world. He hates what he is and what he's done. As a result he rightly fears God's judgment. But this is what allows him to see what no one else does. By seeing first his own sin and the penalty he deserves, he alone is given the grace to see the glory of the cross. He alone understands when he hears the King pleading for the forgiveness of the world. He alone sees the King buying it with his precious blood. And this is what prompts him to turn to Jesus with a trusting plea for mercy: "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." His faith is rewarded with the promise, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." And later the same day that one man who saw the glory of the cross saw Jesus in his heavenly glory.

We want to see it too. And that's why while we are in this life we need to keep our focus on the glory of the cross; not only the cross on which Jesus was crucified (though that's always got to be the main focus), but also in whatever crosses the Lord lays on us to bear. There's a glory in them as well because they help remind us of our weakness, our sin, and our need for a Savior as great as the one God sent us in his Son. Seeing the glory of the cross, we, like the criminal on Jesus' right hand, ask to be saved not from our crosses, but rather through them – just as Jesus saved us through his. It's an entirely different way of seeing the world; but then as I've been stressing throughout this message, the rest of the world sees it wrong.

May Jesus in mercy give us the grace to see all things now and always, through the glory of the cross that we too may enter with him into Paradise and see his glory above. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***