

“I Will Give You Rest”

In the name of him who delivers us from this body of death, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel lesson begins with the phrase “At that time”. It forces us to ask the question, “At *what* time?” It's apparent that what follows, the things Jesus has to say, is in response to what's going on at the moment. In order to understand what Jesus is saying in today's text and why, we need to know what that is. So let's do that.

You'll note that the reading comes from end of Matthew chapter eleven. And if there is a single unifying theme in this chapter, it's the question of Jesus' identity. Just who exactly is he? That's how the chapter begins. John the Baptizer is in prison. His disciples are reporting to him on the progress of Jesus' ministry. And, well, John is growing impatient. Jesus isn't doing things the way John imagined he would. Remember how John preached about the coming Christ, that his axe was laid to the root of the tree ready to start chopping, and that his winnowing fork was in his hand to clear the threshing floor and how he would burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. John expected the Christ to be all hellfire and judgment on the wicked. And he will be when he comes again in judgment. But John expected it right then in his time.

Jesus wasn't living up to John's expectations. No, Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus attends a feast at a Pharisee's house where a prostitute washes his feet. And he defends her. Jesus goes to synagogues where he preaches about love and mercy and forgiveness. What in the world is going on? When's he going to bring fire on the wicked? In John's mind Jesus' actions don't add up. He begins to doubt. Maybe Jesus isn't who I thought he was. He sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus for him, “Are you the One who was to come, or should we be looking for another?”

Responding to their question, Jesus draws from the book of Isaiah where the prophet foretells some of the signs of the Messianic age. “Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” He's reminding John from the Scripture that there's more to the Christ's mission than judgment on the wicked. There's restoration and healing and reconciliation – the fixing of what's broken in this fallen world. In quoting Scripture this way, Jesus is reassuring John that yes, I am the One who was to come and my actions prove it. And there's a bit of a rebuke in his words. He's telling John that if he had remembered his Scripture – all of it – he should not have doubted him.

When John's disciples depart to deliver the message, Jesus speaks to the crowd that's with him about John and his ministry, commending John to them as the greatest of the Lord's prophets to date. And then there is what may seem to be a sudden switch in topic. Jesus begins to denounce the people of cities where he's been doing most of his work in northern Galilee. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the Day of Judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hell. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

They are harsh words. And if we consider the greater theme of this chapter, we'll see that Jesus really hasn't changed the subject. John doubted Jesus' identity as the Christ. Jesus

sent word to him that he should have known better, that he was indeed fulfilling Scripture that spoke of what the Christ would do. His actions proved it. But John only doubted. And Jesus cuts him some slack because John is rotting in prison, after all. It's easy to grow impatient when you're suffering. But also, when John doubted, he asked. He looked for confirmation. And Jesus reassured him from God's Word.

The people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and especially Capernaum where Jesus did most of his ministry don't have any excuse. They are witnessing the miraculous signs Jesus does that fulfill Scripture first hand day after day, signs so stunning and convincing that would cause even the most wicked unbelievers on the planet to repent and turn to him in faith. They're seeing all this and they aren't just doubting Jesus, they are flatly rejecting him. And who is it that rejects him the most? It's those who pride themselves in knowing the Scriptures best. It's those who are working the hardest to keep all of God's commandments – and who think they're doing a very good job of it. It's those who are judging and condemning others they perceive to be less successful at keeping the commandments: those dirty, rotten sinners.

And in the critical judgment of these brilliant Bible scholars, that category includes Jesus: Jesus whose disciples eat without ceremonially washing their hands according to the custom, Jesus who hasn't got any appreciation at all for the traditions and teachings of the rabbis, and worst offense of all, Jesus who heals on the Sabbath – who, horror of horrors, has the audacity to defy Almighty God and perform work on the divinely appointed day of rest. These who are so wise and understanding in the ways of the Lord know for certain that Jesus cannot even be a man of God much less the promised Christ. The fantastic miracles and signs he performs mean nothing. These people have the Scriptures. They know what signs to look for in the Christ. But seeing they do not see, and hearing and they do not hear.

Mercifully, not everyone is so blind and deaf to the truth. Some do believe that Jesus is the Christ. They look to him as their Savior. And it's this that prompts Jesus to exclaim, "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

It will be helpful to know that what's translated "little children" is only one word in Greek. It would better be translated "infants" or "babes". It's children on the younger end of the spectrum, those who have not yet acquired the skill of self propulsion. They have to be carried. The question, however, is what does Jesus mean by this? Obviously he's using the word metaphorically. There are adults who believe in him. What does he mean by calling them infants?

Some have suggested that it refers to their child-like faith, the kind of faith that believes whatever it hears without critical analysis. This misses the point. Besides, it seems to imply that believers in Christ are to believe without thinking. Not true. God gave us brains, he expects us to use them. No, what distinguishes infants from the rest of humanity is their absolute dependency. They can't take care of themselves. Somebody has to do everything for them: feed, clean, clothe, wipe, carry, wipe again, put to bed, comfort when they cry.

For the most part, the people who believe in Jesus came to him because they needed something. They heard he could help. And that gave them hope. Like the lepers who cried to him for mercy. Like the woman with the 12-year flow of blood who touched his cloak. Like the centurion with a sick servant or Jairus whose daughter was deathly ill. Like the paralytic who was carried to Jesus by four of his friends – carried because, like an infant, he could do nothing for himself. These people cried out to Jesus in hope that he would hear and answer, just like an

infant cries out for its mother. They came to Jesus because they needed him. And he took care of all of their needs.

All of their needs; not just the physical needs, but also the spiritual needs – which in the greater scheme of things are ultimately more important. Yes, our bodies sometimes need healing, but at all times we suffer from sin-sick souls, unclean as if with leprosy. Selfishness, greed, anger, resentment, envy, cruelty, lust, pride, evil thoughts, unkind words meant to wound ... the list never ends. And those are just the ugly symptoms of the disease. The end of these things is death, and after that, the judgment.

And that, my friends, is a fearful and heavy burden to labor under. But if you are, that's a good thing. You see, the problem with the people who had the Scriptures and yet rejected Jesus as the Christ was that they didn't think they had any needs. But I guarantee that if one of them had come down with some dread disease, the first thing they would have done was to go running to Jesus. The thing is, even if their bodies didn't need healing, their souls still did just like everyone else. But they couldn't see that. They were blind to their sins. Oh, they could easily see the sins of others, but for themselves they thought they had this righteousness thing under control.

They were rather like Paul before his conversion, zealous for God's Law and proud of their track record of keeping it. It took a hard slap down and a special work of God's Holy Spirit to show him otherwise. But listen to him in today's Epistle describing his struggle with sin many years after his conversion: "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." He understands exactly how sick with sin his soul is. He is led to despair over it, in the end crying out – like a spiritual infant who can do nothing for himself – "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of death?" And then he gives the answer: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

He knows to take the burden of sin that he's constantly staggering under to Jesus who promises rest for needy, sin-sick souls; to Jesus who in his own body bore the burden of all sins when he suffered and died on the cross; to Jesus who did all of the work for our salvation so that we could rest in him; to Jesus who continues even now to work at all times, yes, even on the Sabbath Day, to be our Sabbath rest now and forever. May we also then be given the grace to know our own wretchedness, that we may see our great helplessness and constant need, and heed our Lord's invitation to find our rest in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!