

### ***A Sure Thing***

In the name of him who reveals to us his glory, dear friends in Christ: it's said that the only two things in life that are certain are death and taxes. Everything else is subject to levels of probability, chance, and/or doubt. And yet we do seek to be certain of other things, don't we? It's why we buy insurance. It's why we check and then double check on things – especially those related to safety. We want to be sure. We want guarantees. We want proof positive before making a commitment. Of course, the question then is always how sure is sure enough?

As most of you know, a couple of weeks ago I took a flight out to Vermont to visit my mother. It was Omaha to Burlington with a transfer in Detroit. Anyway, my brother is a pilot for one of the airlines, and he offered to get me a standby boarding pass which would provide substantial savings over the cost of a regular commercial ticket. Thing is with a standby pass, you only get on if there's an open seat on the plane. It's a risk. When I expressed my concern, my brother said it won't be a problem, "There are 30 open seats on the first plane and 20 on the other." This was about three days before the flight. I said, "Yeah, but can you guarantee it?" He replied, "No, but I'm 95% certain." Wanting to maximize the time I got to spend with my mom and still get back here in order to prepare for Sunday services, I told him I appreciated the offer, but I didn't want to take the chance.

He thought I was being overly cautious. He flies standby all the time. But then it's not such a big deal for him. If he's delayed for a few hours while he waits for a later flight, he gets to go to hang out in the pilot's lounge, or if it's longer than a few hours he goes to the block of hotel rooms the airline keeps reserved for its flight crews. Pretty sweet. Not me: I'm stuck at the gate or scrambling to find a place to stay in an unfamiliar city (which just happens to be the murder capital of the country). As it turns out, I didn't notice a single seat open on that first plane. And due to weather, several earlier flights out of Detroit were cancelled, which meant that the flight to which I had to transfer was way overbooked. If I had taken his offer, I would have been stuck there overnight and likely most of the next day. So, yes, it cost me more; but I think you'll agree that it paid to be sure.

And here it is: if we want to be certain about things as trivial as an airline flight, how much more do we want to be certain when it comes to spiritual matters? Death is guaranteed. There's no escaping it. But what about what comes after death? Eternity is a long time. You'll spend it either in glory or in flames. What you really want to know is how you can be certain that you'll end up in the right place. You want your eternal destiny to be a sure thing, don't you? So the question is this: how can you know *for sure*?

The Apostle Peter gives us the answer in today's Epistle lesson. In it he tells about the verification he received about Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration. A week before that glorious revelation Jesus had asked his disciples, "What are people saying about me? Who do they think I am?" They told Jesus what they'd been hearing: "Some say you're John the Baptist come back from the dead. Others say you're Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets." Then Jesus asked them, "Well, what about you guys, who do you say that I am?" Peter answered on behalf of the disciples, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The disciples had received a mountain of evidence that pointed to the truth of this confession of faith. They'd witnessed Jesus heal thousands of every illness and injury

imaginable. They'd seen him raise dead people, cast out demons, still storms, and feed multitudes with what amounted to a picnic lunch for one person. They'd also heard him teach – teach sublime truths with such power and authority that they marveled that any human being could be so wise and full of godly insight. Other messianic pretenders had come before, but none of them began to hold a candle to Jesus. The disciples had plenty of proof to confirm that he was the one Christ and Savior that all Israel had been longing for.

But interestingly, all that proof wasn't what convinced Peter and the others that Jesus was indeed the Christ and Son of God. Jesus told them, "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven." That is to say, they did not come to this conclusion merely by using their intellect to process what they'd seen and heard. A lot of others witnessed the same things that the disciples did, and yet they were saying about Jesus all those other things that were incorrect. No, the truth about who and what Jesus is comes by special insight granted by God. Faith in Jesus is a divine gift worked by the Holy Spirit. And those without the Spirit of God cannot discern the truth even when it's literally right in front of their faces.

From those who have not, Jesus says elsewhere, even what they have will be taken; but to those who have, even more will be granted. He was speaking of faith in him. Those who stubbornly and persistently resist the work of the Spirit operating through the revealed Word are like the hard soil in the Parable of the Sower. The Seed can't penetrate the surface and the birds – that is Satan – snatches the Seed away. Those who do have faith are like the other soils in which the Seed takes root. The goal of Jesus, like any good farmer, is to make sure that such plants once germinated grow to fruition. He's well aware of the obstacles to growth: the hard, subsurface rocks of hidden sins that can destroy faith once begun and the weeds of worldly concerns that can choke and starve it. He also knows that even the most faithful people are subject to doubt. Thus, he seeks to enlarge and strengthen what faith exists in them so that they are able to overcome doubt and temptation and to bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

And so, it is that Jesus takes with him his three closest disciples to the top of the mountain to experience of vision of his glory that will confirm the faith in him which they previously confessed. In today's Gospel we reviewed what happened up there, exactly what the disciples saw and heard. Writing about it many years later, Peter, in today's Epistle says (and I'll paraphrase here a bit), "Look, we didn't make this stuff up about Jesus. We weren't telling tall tales or following clever myths that we cooked up among ourselves when we told you about all the things Jesus said and did. No, we saw his majestic glory with our own eyes. With our own ears we heard the thundering voice of the Father from heaven declare, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.' We were there. And we will never forget or doubt the absolutely amazing things that we experienced there."

Now, as you listen to this testimony of the Apostle, maybe you're thinking, "Okay, that's well and fine for you, Peter; but I wasn't with you on the mountain. I haven't had the vision of Jesus' glory that you say you received. What you experienced confirmed *your* faith in Jesus. It made *you* more certain about who and what he is. But how does that make it a surer thing for *me*?"

It seems that Peter anticipates a response something like this, because he continues, "We *do* have something more sure than my testimony about what I saw and heard on the mountain. We have the prophetic word, and you would do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." What he's saying is better than my vision on the mountain, more proof positive for you, is the testimony of Holy Scripture. You imagine that you haven't heard the voice of the Father

testifying about Jesus his beloved Son? Oh, yes you have. The men who wrote the Holy Scripture weren't putting down their own thoughts and ideas. They spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. What you have in Scripture is God's testimony about Jesus.

And of course, what Peter is speaking about are what we call the Old Testament Scriptures. Remember, the New Testament hadn't been written yet. But Jesus himself said the same thing referring to the Old Testament. He told his adversaries, "You search the Scriptures because in them you think you have life; but these are they that testify about *me*." Likewise, with the disciples on the road to Emmaus who didn't know they were walking along with the crucified and risen Lord, Jesus revealed himself to them not by sight (at least not initially), but by taking them on a tour of the Old Testament. "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." By the time they got to Emmaus, these disciples were firmly convinced that Jesus was indeed the Christ and Savior and that he had risen from the dead. But they still hadn't actually seen and recognized him in person. They didn't need to. What made it sure for them was the testimony of the Scripture.

We sometimes imagine that if we had a glorious vision like Peter did on the mountain, or if we witnessed a miracle, or if we had an angel appear to us with a special message, that that would somehow make our faith in Jesus more sure. It's not true. Jesus said as much in the story about the rich man and Lazarus. When the rich man in hell asks that Lazarus be allowed to return to earth to warn his brothers of the peril they are in, Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them." The rich man protests, "No, Father Abraham; but if someone rises from the dead, then they'll believe." To which Abraham replies, "If they won't believe Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe if someone rises from the dead."

Faith comes by hearing the Word of God, not by seeing miracles. And the entire testimony of Scripture is God's Word about Jesus. Cover to cover, the book is about him: his incarnation and perfect life, his suffering and death for sin, his resurrection and his ascension on high, his coming return. And though I'm an Old Testament kind of guy, I'll include the New Testament here too. In fact, there's a bit of irony in the text because Peter is telling about how the prophets wrote under inspiration from God – and yet as he writes, he is under the same inspiration. God is speaking of Jesus through him.

But the bottom line is this: You want to be certain? You want your faith in Jesus to be a sure thing? Peter says, "Pay attention to the Scripture, the prophetic Word of God." Hear it. Read it. Meditate upon it. It's your light in this dark world of doubt and despair where all things but death and taxes are uncertain. Through the prophetic Word the Holy Spirit will enlighten your heart and make your faith in Jesus and your hope of glory in him a sure thing. God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***