

Marks of the Church: the Holy Cross

In the name of him who leads the way and bids us “Take up your cross, and follow me”, dear friends in Christ: For our Lenten evening devotions this year we have been reviewing the seven marks of the Church as identified by Martin Luther. These are the visible markers that tell us the Church is there even if we can’t see the Church itself because by definition it consists only of the faithful, and faith is a quality that can’t be seen. The first four marks are the means of grace: God’s Word, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the Keys by which sins are forgiven or retained. The fifth mark is the Office of the Ministry which employs the means of grace in the service of God’s people. The sixth is the response of the faithful manifested in praise, thanksgiving, and prayer. Where we see these things going on, there we know the Church must be.

Last evening, Maundy Thursday, we considered a mark of the Church that is not on Luther’s list of seven, but that certainly is on our Lord’s. Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” The Christian love we show towards each other *should* be a mark of the Church; sadly, all too often it’s not.

We come this evening to the last of the marks. It’s one that seems especially fitting for Good Friday: it’s the Holy Cross. What is it? Let me begin by saying what it isn’t. In Luther’s day, if a church claimed to have the Holy Cross, they meant it quite literally: an actual piece of wood from the cross on which the Savior died. It would have been considered a holy relic and placed inside an elaborate showcase embellished with gold and jewels so that pilgrims could stand or kneel before it and gaze on it with wonder – an act called *veneration*, which according to the religious scholars earned merit in the sight of God that reduced the amount of time one would have to spend in Purgatory after death and before entering heaven. Besides bits and pieces of the cross other items were declared holy relics: straw from the manger in which the Christ Child was laid, the tip of the lance that pierced his side, the bones of various saints, pretty much anything if it’s mentioned in the Bible or some religious legend could be declared a holy relic – the vast majority of which were fake, of course; but if the church put its seal of approval on it, no one dare argue.

Creating and consecrating such relics was a major industry in the middle ages. These days it doesn’t happen quite as often; but that’s not a problem because there are tens of thousands relics still around from back then. No doubt you heard about the terrible tragedy that befell the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris this past Tuesday. The 800 year old sanctuary was heavily damaged by fire. But all was not lost. Out of the news coverage came the report of a brave priest who risked his life to save a number of holy relics from the altar including what is supposedly a bit of the crown of thorns that was thrust down of the Savior’s head.

Regarding the creation of relics and the consecration of other supposedly holy items, Luther had this to say: “Now when the devil saw God building this holy Christian Church, he took no holiday, but built his own chapel alongside it, greater than God’s temple. And this is how he did it. He saw that God took outward things, — baptism, Word, Sacrament, keys, — and used them to make His church holy; and because [the devil] is always aping God and trying to imitate God and improve on Him in everything, he, too, took outward things that were to become means to holiness ... and he even has the Lord’s Prayer prayed over them and the Gospels read over them. Thus through the popes and [their followers] he has caused the consecration,

or hallowing, of water, salt, herbs, candles, bells, images ... chasubles, tonsures, ... — who will count all these things? At last he made the monks' cowls so holy that people died in them and were buried in them, as though by so doing they were saved.”

Luther correctly saw that the end of all this flimflammy was to divert people's trust away from Christ and his accomplished work of salvation on the cross to worthless idols made by the hands of men—which is precisely what Satan desires. And that he can do so in a way that has a look of pious spirituality about it, so much the better – for him.

So, no, when Luther identified the Holy Cross as a mark of the Church, he wasn't referring to ancient scraps of wood with doubtful providence. He meant instead the hardship and suffering that the Church endures due to persecution for its faith in Christ Jesus, as well as the stress and trouble that it undergoes due to evil and the temptations of the devil, the world, and its members' own sinful flesh.

Let me state it as plainly as I can. The devil hates Jesus. No surprise there: he is the enemy of God and of everything that is good, right, and holy. The world hates Jesus. The secular world hates him because it resists his call to repent. It denies his authority to determine what is right and what is wrong, and refuses to believe that one day all people will be judged by him. The religious world hates Jesus because his Gospel won't allow for any contribution toward salvation on the part of fallen humans. The true Gospel is an offense to its self-justifying pride. And yes, our own sinful flesh hates Jesus for the reasons already mentioned and because it is by nature in full rebellion against him.

We know where all this hatred directed toward Jesus led: to his betrayal, his mock trial, his condemnation by both religious and secular authorities, his cruel torture, and his bloody death. Then the enemies of Jesus thought they had beaten him. They thought they had won. But they were wrong. Their evil played right in to God's perfect plan to save sinners. And by putting Jesus to death, they put him up against the greatest enemy of all – which is death itself. But death proved no match for Jesus. It couldn't hold him. And on the third day, Jesus arose the victor. Death was defeated. Our biggest and most dangerous foe is conquered.

But the rest of the enemies fight on – for now. And because they hate Jesus, they hate also those who trust in him. From the earliest days of the Church to the present believers have been maligned as heretics, mocked, robbed, driven out, abused, tortured, raped, put to death – often by people who sincerely believed they were serving God by doing so. Certainly Luther and the other reformers experienced the Holy Cross in their day being declared outlaws and heretics in part for pointing people to Christ and him crucified and away from trinkets declared to be sacred relics. All of them suffered under persecutions, and many of them paid the ultimate price.

It continues in the present. Just this week I read a report of a Christian church in Iran. Apparently it's permissible for Muslims there to speak to a Christian pastor. They can claim they are only investigating the differences in the faiths or that they are arguing on behalf of Islam. But should one of them decide to convert, that's another story. How do they know someone has converted? Baptism. The Muslims there rightly understand that Christian Baptism moves a person from one faith to the other. It happens that 38 converts were to be baptized on a certain day. They showed up at the church and were waiting in the aisle for the pastor to arrive and baptize them. An angry crowd showed up instead. They explained that their pastor had been kidnapped, tortured, and murdered. Then they told the converts, “Now that you know the cost, are you ready to follow Jesus through baptism and beyond?” Not one of

them walked away. The report I read didn't say what happened to them. I don't believe they were killed on the spot; but of this I'm certain: their lives will be a whole lot more difficult from here on out.

We have not experienced anything like this in our time and place. The religious freedoms enshrined in our Constitution have thus far prevented it. But the times they are a changing, and those who confess Christ and the truth of God's Word are increasingly coming under attack. They are being called hateful, bigoted, intolerant, unfit to serve in public offices. I anticipate that it will only get worse.

But this is not reason for fear or despair. Quite the contrary, in several of this evening's readings we're told that it is cause for rejoicing. From Jesus: "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." From St. Peter: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." From St. Paul: "... we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

In the same way that the Lord used the unjust suffering of Christ to work good for the world, so he uses the Holy Cross, the persecution of the faithful, to work good for them. It purifies and deepens our faith, it teaches us patience and hope, it makes us more Christ-like, and it sharpens our witness to unbelievers. With the Holy Cross, as with all the other marks of the Church, the Lord God makes us his holy people and blesses us. Therefore let us not fear this Holy Cross when it comes, but humble ourselves under the Lord's mighty hand, and rejoice that we are counted worthy to suffer for the sake of Christ's name. To him alone, our Savior who loved us and gave himself for us, be all honor, praise, and glory, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!