

A Word of Blessing

In the name of the Lamb who was slain for us and for our salvation, dear friends in Christ: The churchy sounding verb “bless” has a number of meanings. It’s most commonly used to refer to God’s gracious bestowal of gifts upon his people, as in “God has blessed me with this or that.” On the other hand, it can also mean to thank or to extol as in Psalm 103: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name”; or again as we use it at the conclusion of the Divine Service we’re using today: I’ll say to you “Let us bless the Lord” and you’ll respond, “Thanks be to God”.

It’s this latter use of “bless” that we see in the reading from Revelation. There we’re given a glimpse of the ongoing worship in the heavenly throne room as innumerable saints and angels bow down before God and the Lamb, singing a new song, and thanking Jesus for the great salvation he achieved for us by his blood. The thing to see is that we saints on earth participate in this blessing of the Lord’s name when we gather here for worship. We say as much in the Communion liturgy: “Therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we laud and magnify your glorious name evermore praising you and saying, ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; the whole earth is full of your glory.’” Indeed, all of creation joins in this blessing of the Lord’s name.

But since on this blessed day we’re witnessing the confirmation of three of our young members, it’s the first use of “bless” I mentioned that I’d like to focus on. In short order, after giving witness to their faith in the Triune God and the mighty salvation he accomplished through Jesus the Son, they will kneel before the altar to receive a blessing – a blessing that will include a passage of Scripture that will be their confirmation verse. In many of our churches these verses are assigned. Truth be told, what they normally do is buy a package of preprinted certificates on which you fill in the blank with the date and name of the candidate. They come in sets of ten with ten different verses. You get the verse that happens to be on the certificate they write your name on. It works; but I prefer to have the candidates for confirmation choose a verse of their own, one that they find especially meaningful and near and dear to their hearts.

For today’s message, I’d like to do something a bit different; and that’s to comment on the verses these candidates have selected as their confirmation blessings. Before I do, I should mention that many pastors (including myself) typically use a person’s confirmation verse as the text for their funeral sermon. So, you candidates consider this: you’re hearing your funerals in advance – which is just as well because when the time comes you’ll not be able to hear it.

Kylie has chosen the word of the Lord to Joshua (1:9) “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.” The verse comes at the end of the Lord’s commissioning of Joshua. He’s being appointed to take over for Moses who has led Israel in the desert these last 40 years. Joshua is now the man in charge. And the Lord lays before him a huge and daunting task: the invasion and conquest of the Promised Land.

Joshua has every reason to be apprehensive. The Canaanites are a fearsome people, well schooled in the arts of war. They have armor and stockpiles of iron weapons. They live in fortified cities with great walls and defensive towers. They have war horses and chariots. The Israelites, on the other hand, are refugee slaves. Since leaving Egypt they’ve only fought a few skirmishes. They know nothing of strategy or battle tactics. They have no chariots, no armor,

not even many weapons to speak of – and the few they have are made of inferior bronze. Joshua knows all this. Well he might wonder, “How in the world are we going to pull this off?”

In this passage the Lord is telling him, don’t worry about any of that. Be strong. Be courageous. *I* will be with you. You cannot lose with me leading the way. Your victory is guaranteed. It’s in my hands. I will see you through every single challenge you have to face.

Now, to the best of my knowledge the Lord is not ordering any of our three confirmands to conquer a foreign nation. But he is setting before them a number of daunting and potentially frightening challenges. They are well into the process of transitioning from children to adults. In a few months they’ll be in high school. After that they’ll likely pursue further education; they’ll be preparing for careers, seeking spouses, getting married, starting families; they’ll be taking on positions of increased responsibility. They’ll have to overcome obstacles and endure heartaches they can’t begin to imagine now. At each turn they’ll be made to wonder, “Am I doing this right? Am I making the right choices? What if I get this wrong?”

The promise the Lord made to Joshua applies also to them – indeed, to all of the faithful. The Lord says you need not fret about or fear what lies ahead. I am with you. Your life is in my mighty hands. I will see you through every challenge that I in my wisdom have planned for you to face.

I hasten to add that there is a danger in taking a verse out of its context. The Lord here promises to be with his faithful. And there’s a tendency to think of his presence as an unseen and silent spiritual cloud of protection or something. But that’s not it. In the passage immediately before the verse in question, the Lord warns Joshua *to not let the words of this Book* (referring to the Holy Scripture) *depart from your mouth*. The Lord is present in his Word. By his Word he leads, guides, protects, builds faith and fearlessness, and produces the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of his people. Joshua in his life didn’t let those words depart. He treasured God’s Word, read it, spoke it, and meditated upon it all the days of his life. And the Lord was with him. The Lord conquered a country through him. And in the end the Lord gave him peaceful rest in the eternal Promised Land. But subsequent generations did not treasure and keep God’s Word. And so the Lord removed his gracious presence and his hand of protection from them. They suffered the consequences. And sadly too many of the youth confirmed in our churches let the same thing happen to them. Don’t let it happen to you. Keep the Word and thus the Lord near to you.

Andrew chose the words of St. Paul from Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Paul wrote this while in prison in Rome. To say it gently, his circumstances were uncomfortable. He was awaiting a trial that he had every reason to believe would end in his death. But note how very different his attitude is than the Paul (then called Saul) we heard about in today’s first reading. He was proud, puffed up, convinced that he was doing the Lord’s work by persecuting Christians. He was a Pharisee among Pharisees, confident in a righteousness all his own, certain that the Lord God on high was beaming down his approval upon him. “Good job, Paul! You’re doing great work!”

He was made to discover otherwise. He met the risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus road. He was humbled, humiliated, cast down, made blind, and ultimately a beggar pleading in prayer for God’s mercy – a mercy that he knew he deserved less than anyone on the planet. He had tried to destroy Christ and his Church. But Jesus showed him mercy. Jesus opened his eyes. Thus Paul came to understand God’s grace in Christ better than anyone else. “If he could forgive a guy like me ...” And Jesus used Paul to accomplish great things. The man who had tried to destroy the Church became one of its chief architects and master builders. He

spread the Word of Christ's Gospel far and wide. He suffered immensely in the process, facing persecution, beatings, hunger and cold, shipwreck, several imprisonments, and multiple assassination attempts. When he says he can do all things, he doesn't mean he can leap over tall buildings in a single bound or stop a rushing freight train with his bare hands. He means that by his own strength and will he can't do anything at all. He means that he relies entirely on Jesus: on his strength, his righteousness, his obedience, his death for sin and the power of his resurrection – these are what strengthen Paul to endure whatever trial and tribulation comes his way. And to the confirmands I say this: they are what will strengthen you also to do all the things the Lord has planned for you.

We come to Kelby who chose John 15:9, the words of our Lord Jesus to his disciples: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." Let me set this up. It's Thursday evening of Holy Week. Jesus and his disciples have just celebrated the Passover meal in which he instituted the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. He knows that in only a few hours he will be arrested, face trial, and in the morning his brutal scourging and crucifixion. But his concern is not for himself and the horrors he will soon endure, but rather it's for those he will leave behind. He's told them, "Where I am going, you cannot come now." He is preparing them for his departure with wise words of instruction.

The verse Kelby selected comes from the broader passage in which Jesus describes himself as the True Vine and his disciples as the branches. "Unless you remain in me", he warns them, "you can do nothing at all. ... but if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit." Having said this, he goes on to reveal a bit about the mystery of the Holy Trinity. "As the Father has loved me": the Father loves the Son by giving himself, his very divine essence, completely, totally, one hundred percent. The Son exists because of the Father's eternal, ongoing, self-sacrificial love. "So I have loved you": now the eternal Son who has become our brother in human flesh gives himself sacrificially in love for all mankind when he suffers and dies for our sin on the cross. And he continues to give himself for us in his Word and Sacrament. "Abide in my love."

Jesus wants us to live in his love – which is not simply that we have some vague sense of awareness that he has warm, fuzzy feelings of affection for us; but it is specifically his sacrificial love that we are to live in. He's telling us to be where he is in love giving himself for us. Where's that? Well, most clearly in the Lord's Supper. Remember that he's just instituted the Sacrament in which he gave his body and blood to his disciples, and he's on the way to giving that same body and blood on the cross. Live in that, he telling them. Live in the absolute assurance that I give my body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. Abide in that love – and you will bear much fruit. And of course the fruit he's looking for is love: our love for one another.

Good: three verses, three confirmation blessings. As their instructor, I'm especially pleased that the common theme that runs through the verses they selected is dependency upon God and his Word. It means I did something right. The Lord promises to be with those who keep his Word in their mouths. He promises the ability to do all things to those who rely on his strength not their own. And he urges us to live forgiven in his sacrificial love that we might bear the fruit of love in abundance. Therefore may the Lord bless these who about to be confirmed – and the rest of us too – with the grace to keep his Word, rely on his strength, and abide in his love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!