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The Unity of the Church and Her Worship

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ASCENSION

LUKE 24:50-53

Farewells are usually occasions of sadness. Hindsight and reflection recall unfulfilled intentions, the lack of meaningful communications which might have filled the past. Thoughts of the future offer only the condition of separation and severance from the departed one. When death severs us from the presence of a loved one, our continuing impressions thereafter are usually tinged by the gray of regret. But not so with the departure of Jesus to His Father, for His ascension to the right hand of glory stands in dramatic contrast to all these earthly departures.

Christ's Ascension Is the Source of Our Great Joy

I. *The Joyful Reaction of the Disciples to Jesus' Ascension Indicates a Full Committal to Him and His Promises*

A. They returned to Jerusalem with great joy (v. 52). No shadow of sorrow disturbs their joy (1 Peter 1:8). They had been promised power in the coming of the Holy Ghost. Jesus had also outlined their task of proclamation, and an angel had repeated the promise of Jesus to return again to them (Acts 1:8-11; Introit). Thus His ascension contributed to and became a part of their whole joy in believing, to which subsequent incidents in the history of the early church bear witness. (Cf. Acts 5:4; 16:25; Phil. 2:2; 16-18; James 1:2 f.; 1 Peter 4:12-14)

B. Their full committal was reflected in what they did: They worshiped, thus acknowledging their dependence on Him, their shared devotion toward Him. With past ministry, death and resurrection, and now ascension as part of their current trust, they

praised Him continually, in the total confidence of faith. This "already sharing" of His eternal victory was the source of their constant joy, the wellspring of their worship.

II. *Christians Today, Related to Christ by Faith, Can Also Move with Such Joy*

A. Faith relates us to the ascended Christ: He who blessed the disciples also has blessed us by the revelation of Himself and the work of His love, evidenced in His doing for us from Incarnation to Consummation. His love "compelled" Him (24:46) to suffer, die, rise from the dead, that we might be joined to Him. It is the Spirit-given appropriation of this comprehensive action of God for men which has brought man into a relationship with Him in the church. (Cf. 1 John 1:1-4)

B. The joy of faith has rich resource: We are rooted in the ascended Lord and Savior, who rules for us over all things (Rom. 8; Col. 1). We find constant support in the gifts of a victorious Savior, who provides, through His gifts, for our perpetual life in Him (Eph. 4), who reigns over, and governs for our good, every existing force and factor, to sustain our faith-founded joy in Him.

C. But *does* the Christian travel with this ascension joy? The traps of the world are always open before us. The tangibility of things greets our fleshly demands for types of security (in which we find "joy") which are local, immediate. Faith alone often seems inadequate. Our hearts and minds (Collect) fail "to ascend and with Him continually dwell." Failing to use His gifts, and the strengths which Word and Sacrament provide, our dependence imperceptibly shifts to defective, transitory, and limited things. Hence our joy is not full. The substratum

is unsettled. We have forgotten who it is that blessed us with His enduring forgiveness and love, centered in the Cross, validated by the Resurrection, sealed forever in the fullness of a shared everlasting life.

III. *The Joy of Faith in the Ascended Christ Should Find Expression in Every Aspect of the Christian's Life*

A. In his worship life with the church. Our hymns, prayers, speakings, and hearings within the contexts of formal worship manifest the joy of people who have encountered and received the blessing of the exalted Lord of Glory (Col. 3:16); the issue of a fastened, certain conviction of faith in One who transcends in power and concern all things positive and negative.

B. In his total living, moving, being. "This same Jesus . . . shall come." With a sure, calm expectancy in the perfect resolution of all things under the Lordship of the ascended Christ, the Christian endures as well as enjoys everything placed before him. His Spirit-given perceptions enable him to interpret *all* of life in terms of that One who loved him, gave Himself for him, and who now reigns in heaven on his behalf.

Conclusion

Repeat the Collect or its alternate.

EXAUDI

JOHN 7:33-39

The astronaut's Nile—a silver strand moving through the yellow waste; fringing the edges of the river and in some cases penetrating far into the desert, the lush, green evidences of the life its waters give; the great rivers of the Central United States, nourishing the bread-basket of our nation and supplying huge resources of food and life for teeming coastal centers—these illustrate the function of Christ's Gospel as it moves through the people He has called to be.

Rivers of Living Water

I. *Followers of the Christ Are Also Carriers of Life* (Vv. 37-38)

A. Christians are the living response to His invitation, "Come!" The Rivers of Living Water, an extension of the picture of Christ, the Water of Life, recalls the historical analogy of the Rock in the wilderness (Num. 20:7-11; 1 Cor. 10:1-4). The life of faith and union with the Son comes to those who have heeded the invitation to "Come . . . and drink." (Is. 55:1 ff.)

B. Drinking this water means involvement in the person and work of the Christ. The invitation is that of the Gospel, coming from Christ in the forms of Word and Holy Baptism. Through these instruments we become incorporated into Christ's person, and carriers of the Life which He is and yearns to communicate to the rest of the world. (Rom. 6:2 ff., John 17:19-21)

II. *Followers of Christ Are Communicators of Life*

A. "As the Father has sent Me . . ." Like Christ, the Christian is sent to a lost world. Recall Kipling's "Gunga Din." The world's death is inherent in its disassociation from Christ. As the Jews in vv. 35-36 (cf. Rom. 8:11 ff.) failed to grasp His purpose or intention (but unwittingly prophesied the truth), so the world has missed the meaning of the Gospel (cf. Jesus' judgment, v. 34). Hence Christians are not only carriers of the Water of Life, but they are to be the *dispensers* of it also, just as Christ descended *with* Life, to be the giver of Life.

B. But the fact is that our sharing in this work of Christ is only occasionally what it could be. We are earthen vessels, cracks and all; depositories, hardly dispensaries; often more like the Dead Sea than life-giving rivers. Suffering from thinness of the Spirit and dislocation from the close

unity with Christ which results in unity of purpose, Christ's men have considerably more than "one foot" in the world. Rivers stop running when they are cut off from their source! (Cf. vv. 34, 36)

III. *The Call of Jesus, "Come to Me and Drink!" Still Goes Out to Every Man*
(Introit)

A. It goes out to the Christian, for Christ, the Water of Life, through whose death our life is assured in spite of our failure and our frequent turning away, was pierced, and His strength was dried up like a potsherd, that we should never thirst. Through the constant redrinking of His gracious promises our forgiveness is assured, the Spirit-given relationship with Christ is restored, and the Christian is empowered to be a dispenser of the Water of Life which has refreshed him.

B. The Holy Spirit moves through the witness of the Christian to bring life to the world. With the channel unblocked and wide once more, the Spirit of God functions to propel the Christian in his task of pouring the Good News out of his whole being ("belly" of v. 38 is better translated "self," "personality," "heart").

Conclusion

Describe the course of the Gospel among men in terms of the nourishing waters of a stream like the Rhine.

like an other-worldly, swirling wind, tongues of flame, speech of over a dozen origins—the Spirit had come! Today, perhaps with less drama, the Spirit of Truth still breathes as the church continues in its love for Christ.

The Savior's Pentecost Promise

I. *Christ's Legacy of Comfort to His Church Is the Spirit of Truth*

A. The Spirit is Communicator of the Truth of God, bringing to fruition in God's people the content of His promises to them (cf. Rom. 8:14-16), the assurance that we are loved of the Father. (Vv. 16, 21)

B. A Paraclete like His predecessor, Jesus, He confirms within us the conviction that we are under the grace of God's forgiveness through an effective, sin-remitting relationship with Christ. Thus we are never left as "orphans," "alone and without God in the world." He, Christ, makes sure, by the sending of the Spirit that we will not be left comfortless (v. 18). Our relationship with Him is sustained.

C. He abides with us forever (v. 17), "with us," His body, the church; "in us" as individuals. The faith-centered vision of Christ which the Spirit gives is the constant reminder of our life in Christ (v. 19) and gives us the perception of our interrelationship both with Him and the Father (v. 20). This vision and perception is the property both of individual members and of the church in common.

II. *The Spirit Gives Motion to the Love of Christ Among Members of the Church*

A. A love for Christ can be seen in the keeping of His commandments (vv. 15, 21 a). For the Christian in whom the Spirit dwells loving Christ means keeping His commandments, and keeping His commandments is the equivalent of loving Him. As God loved, "so that He gave" (John 3:16),

PENTECOST

JOHN 14:15-21

It was nothing like anything they had ever experienced. But it didn't take long for the disciples to realize what it meant. When God promises, it comes true with undeniable impact and reality. There was no time to stand in awe, to be afraid. In one swift demonstration of power and presence the promise of the Spirit was fulfilled. A sound,

so Christian love is no mere passionate attachment of the heart but a concrete, active exposure of the keeping of Christ's commandments. Cf. 15:12 — "This is My commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you."

B. Christ's presence, under the auspices of the Spirit, occurs as Christians fulfill His command, as they (A., above) verbalize to one another the rich promises of God to His church; as they (B., above) assume the priestly function toward one another of communicating the forgiveness of sins in Christ; as they (C., above) share and promote in their midst the presence of Christ through Word and Sacrament.

III. *The Presence of the Spirit of Truth in the Church Is the Promise of Glory*

A. Under His guidance the church moves confidently toward eternity. The Spirit gives us all we need to sense and walk in the right directions (John 16:13). He is the enabling power of the church for the carrying out of Christ's will.

B. He leads us to that day in which the fullness of eternal life is ours (v.19), in which our union with Him and the Father will be complete and final. (V.20)

Conclusion

The Savior fulfills His Pentecost promise not with startling visible demonstration of power, but now, rather, with a continuing Pentecost in the often secret dynamics of the kingdom of God at work in and through the body of Christ.

St. Louis, Mo. ROBERT J. WERBERIG

THE FEAST OF THE HOLY TRINITY

MATTHEW 28:16-20

Introduction

"Who has known the mind of the Lord?" The Epistle asks the question with the con-

viction that all mankind must answer, "No man." His judgments are unsearchable and His ways are inscrutable. Every man is beyond his depth when he tries to measure the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. But in another sense every Christian who hears that question joyfully answers, "I do!" For the mind of the Lord has been clearly shown to be so determinedly turned in love to all mankind that He gave Himself in Christ for their redemption. And every Christian who rejoices at his own salvation must think of the many who remain in the sorrow of their sins. It is impossible for us to know—but not to know the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge and grace of God, how tragic! And as for *what we know*, how can we do less than to determine that we will share the good news that has made us disciples in order that more and more might become disciples.

Convinced as we are that God was in Christ and that Christ is Lord of all, we determine to make disciples of all nations.

We Know What He Has in Mind

I. *We Are Convinced Because We Have Seen the Lord*

A. Our view of the Lord has been given to us by our baptism. It may sometimes seem to us that we have a smaller privilege than was granted to those who lived on earth when our Lord lived on earth in visible humanity. But the difference is no more than a matter of impressions on the optic nerve, on the eardrums. And those impressions were discounted by many who received them. "Some doubted." Some doubt the power of Holy Baptism too, but to us who believe it is quite evidently the power of God. It brought us to faith, bringing the faithful God into our lives. By it we were "born of water and the Spirit," as the Gospel's phrase expresses it. We who were

flesh born of flesh have by the Spirit's power become the sons of God.

B. Our view of the Lord is grounded in the teaching of the Word. When the disciples in the text saw the Lord, they worshiped Him. Our desire to have lived when our Lord made Himself visible among us is as understandable as preferring visual aids to the lecture method. But we who need to know do not need to see to know. He who promised to be always with His church always accompanies His Word with His power and His grace. What they saw brought them to faith and to worship. They saw the Word made flesh. What we have heard, the Word in words, has brought us to faith and to worship.

Hear it once again, and know the Spirit's power that moves to faith. This is what they had seen and what we hear. This Jesus Christ, a Prophet mighty in word and deed, in all He said and did made clear that He had come to seek and to save the lost. This Jesus Christ offered His own body as the Lamb of God to bear the sins of the world. He suffered and was buried. And He rose. He showed Himself alive to His disciples. It was not easy for those disciples to believe, and we, too, know that feeling of resistance to a believing acceptance of what we cannot scientifically prove. But they saw Him, and they worshiped. And we have heard that same Word. We worship. We believe. We are convinced that God was in Christ, that the Holy Trinity who gave us new birth in Holy Baptism is our God forever and ever.

II. *We Are Determined Because We Have Been Sent by the Lord*

A. All authority in heaven and on earth is His. The Father who sent Him to save has raised Him from the dead. He is highly exalted. All men should bow and worship Him. What is about to happen, what His

disciples will see on the Mount of Ascension is to be evident again. He is no longer to be found only in Palestine. His are the worlds, the kingdoms and the riches of them. All that the Holy Trinity has accomplished and yet determines to accomplish is in that "all authority."

B. By that authority He sends us. He breathed on His disciples and gave to them the Holy Spirit. We are His disciples and have received His Spirit. The power that is His is a power that He gives. What He sends us to do is clear. Make disciples. Baptize them in the name of the Holy Trinity. Teach them to observe—not merely to look at and acknowledge as fact, but to take in, to do—all that His words and His deeds have released of the power of the Word of God. We are to help them know what no man can know, and what we by the grace of God have come to know, that the mind of God is toward all men a mind of steadfast lovingkindness.

C. With that authority He accompanies us. It is very obvious in our Lord's mind—He has all authority, and therefore *we* should go. He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and all men should be His disciples. Therefore we who are His disciples by His grace should make other disciples, baptizing them. Is it less obvious to us? Do we hesitate? Should it not be obvious that He will be with us always? Should there be any doubt that He who could make us His disciples by Word and water can equally turn other enemies into disciples by the Word and that water when it reaches those men through His emissaries? This is the work of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. That work is not finished until all He has chosen have accepted His invitation to come. That work will go on to the close of the age. And we are to do it until the end of ours.

The work is going on. God is working

His mighty works in the world, and the Spirit continues to blow where He will. The only question is whether we will go on. And part of that question is whether we can recognize our share in that "all nations" in the neighborhoods around us, in the family, in the city, in the nation, and in the world. God was in Christ and is in the Spirit. And Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are with us. We go!

TRINITY I

MATTHEW 13:31-35

Introduction

"Three measures of meal, and I nothing but a lump of leaven." Can you imagine a bit of yeast muttering those words in a despairing tone? Would it not rather pull itself together, thank God for the power built into it, and get to the work of leavening until all three measures would be leavened?

"All those birds waiting to make nests in my branches, everybody expecting me to become the greatest of shrubs, and me but the smallest of all seeds." Can you imagine the mustard seed groaning about his lot? "What's more, this brackish soil, this rocky field—who could expect even the greatest of all seeds managing even the smallest of shrubs out of this environment?" Or would the seed rather remember that he is a seed, that within him is burgeoning the mysterious secret of life, capsuled by a great God who knows what He is doing, and with thankfulness begin to germinate?

And ought not we who by the love of God have been made leaven and life by love make the Kingdom grow?

By Leaven and Life the Kingdom Grows

I. *God Brings In the Day of the Kingdom by Minute Things*

A. The power is placed in the small seed. Jesus is combatting the idea of His fellows

in the Jewish nation that the Kingdom would be some sort of glorious empire in which God's people were somehow on top and everyone else from Samaria to Rome on bottom. He Himself, Seed of the woman, is like a grain of wheat whose destiny is to fall into the earth, die, and bear much fruit. (John 12:24)

We are part of that harvest. What is harvested ought to be like what was sown. God's promise that His Word shall accomplish what He purposes applies here too (Is. 55:10-11). The Seed will sprout and bring forth, providing not only bread for the eater but seed for the sower. So we.

B. The power works in hidden ways. The Lord frequently used the figure of leaven as a negative illustration. He warned against the leaven of the Pharisees. St. Paul urged Christians to live the unleavened life. But here Jesus boldly uses the figure for the opposite effect, the secret working of the power of God to make His kingdom come. It is a great mystery that one of God's methods should be to work in the world with hidden wisdom.

He Himself was content to be born of a woman and not of a man and woman, to live that down among men as part of the offering up of His whole life to God. He was ready to speak in parables—indeed to say nothing to them without a parable—in order that, by the Spirit's new creating, men might develop new ears to hear. He was willing to hold back on the great miracles which both common sense and Satanic suggestion agreed would be convincing to men. He was in agreement with His Father's decision to refrain from the explicit statements that would have argued men into the Kingdom in favor of the demonstrations and the inductive approach that the Spirit proposed to use that no man would be compelled to enter the Kingdom but would be drawn by faith. Without complaint the Lamb of God went to slaughter,

even though it was obvious that an elaborate mental reconstruction would be necessary before men could understand that that was the way of God's salvation. From the fact of sin and the promise of a loving rescue, through the whole symbolism of Old Testament sacrifices, men would have to move to make meaningful the offer of the life of the Son of God as a sacrifice for sin which was under death sentence from God. And at the same time men must understand how Old Testament sacrifices were not propitiation of God in themselves but reminders that God *was* propitious and thereby understand that the sacrifice of the Son was a gift of God's life to all who are dead in their sins. If all this was a handicap to the Kingdom's success, our Lord was content to say, "So be it," for He knew that what was God's will *would* be.

We have experienced the miracle of re-birth in Holy Baptism and received the new life of God in us by the indwelling Spirit. The power of the body and the blood of Christ has been given to us in the Lord's Supper. We who know the Incarnation and who know our own bodies to be temples of the Holy Spirit ought now to grasp our place in the rest of God's plan, that the whole measured world is to be leavened by God's life in the lives of His sons and daughters. And if we be but a small seed fallen into the whole vast earth that is split asunder into this one huge furrow, still with confidence we quietly germinate, we add our small growth to the single twig of which we are a part, knowing that the total growth will be beyond expectation!

II. *We Who Are of the Day Ought to Make That Principle Ours*

A. We who are alive should help the dead; we who are healed should be medicine to those who are full of sores. We should look for the opportunities to offer to the needy those small acts of love that our Lord promises are done unto Him. Lazarus at

our door is our Lord at hand to be helped. We should see that we are placed in the world specifically to be a leaven. We are not responsible for the achievement of the Word, but we have been made responsible for kneading it into the contemporary loaf.

B. We should accept the secret of the Word working secretly. The whole point of today's Gospel is that the Word, and not "greater" things, will bring men to the Father's house. Explicitly "Moses and the prophets" and the prescription "Let them hear them" have been written out by the Good Physician as the medicine to turn rich men into Lazarus-helpers.

We should not hesitate to use the "dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us" (Ps. 78:2-3) as our power. This is no dubious experiment whose success is quite questionable in our culture, which demands some new design by way of Petri dish or some unique temperature that can be achieved only by our warming over the thoughts of God. God's life is in this germ. Moses and the prophets! Let us hear them. Let us let them hear them.

We should magnify the value of the body and the blood of our Lord as power in our lives. When our Lord removed His visibility from the brotherhood of His disciples, He left this seemingly small sacrament. We need it. And we knead it into the membership of our congregation, and it leavens us to fellowship. We agree to plant it in our corporate life as we do our liturgy on the Lord's Day, and it branches out into every part of our personal life and our serving of others.

What we do then today, around this altar, is evidence of the overflowing grace of God. He gives us not only Moses and the prophets, but One risen from the dead. Such life and love made ours can make the Kingdom grow.

St. Louis, Mo. GEORGE W. HOYER

TRINITY II

MATTHEW 9:9-13

Introduction

For many people the voice of Christ is dead and silent, and His power belonged to an ancient age far distant and remote from our own. He does not seem to grip their hearts as He once did thousands of others centuries ago. Yet Jesus is still calling people to follow Him. Those who have seen the grace of God in that call will not fail to answer His summons. That is what Jesus still does today. By grace Christ calls us to follow Him.

The Call of Christ

I. *Christ Calls Us to Follow Him*

A. We must not follow Him partially. We may not heed His call in parts and spurts, by following Him now and then, or with this but not that. Christ cancels out the man who wants to be in His company only at times or under the right conditions. Compare the replies to the invitation in today's Gospel. Also Matt. 8:21. We cannot follow Christ partially by cherishing selfish ambitions, harboring secret iniquities, coddling favorite sins. Why not? Because . . .

B. Christ calls us to a wholehearted following. There must be no vacancies in our life which He does not fill, no possessions He does not truly own, no thoughts He does not fully command. Collect: "Make us to have a perpetual fear and love of Thy holy name." "Who answers Christ's insistent call Must give himself, his life, his all. . . . Christ claims him wholly for His own, He must be Christ's and Christ's alone."

C. We cannot follow Him with mere intellectual assent. Head knowledge of Christ is not sufficient. Some settle for an intellectual approach to Christ. They believe what Jesus said, subscribe to the doctrines of the Bible, confess the creeds of Christendom. But they follow no further than that. Such

an approach to Christ is inadequate. Why? Because . . .

D. Christ's call is a call to our will. His is a summons to our heart, not just to our head; to our will, not merely to our intellect. Christ was no classroom teacher come to fill men's minds but a leader who called to the will of man to follow and obey. Epistle: "Let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and truth."

II. *Christ Calls Us By Grace*

A. It is by grace, since the call comes through Christ's initiative.

1. We want to believe that we take the initiative in belonging to Christ. It is soothing to believe that Jesus waited for us to move toward Him before He decided to move toward us; that He called us because we first demonstrated some desire to be called, some inclination for Him, some tendency for spiritual matters. We were the active ones. Christ was the passive one. So we would like to believe.

2. Yet Christ calls us solely through His own initiative. Take Matthew as an example. There is no hint or suggestion in the text that something in him prompted the call of Christ. So with us. Before the foundation of the world He chose us (Eph. 1:4). Many of us were infants, spiritually naked and helpless when Christ claimed us in Baptism. All of us were sinners, opposed to God, when called into fellowship with Him. All is a result of Christ's initiative, and thus His call comes through grace.

B. It is by grace, since it is a call to the undeserving.

1. We bar ourselves from the grace of Christ when we think of ourselves as righteous and deserving. Man tries to convince himself that he is deserving of God. So he totals up his assets: Do I not treat my fellowman with kindness? Do I not main-

tain a decent reputation, provide for my loved ones, work for honest wages? Do I not worship my God and obey the government? But Christ cannot help the man who sees himself as deserving. (Vv. 12-13)

2. We, too, are sinners, in need of God's grace. Look at Matthew again. Regarded by the public as a notorious sinner and of the dregs of society, still he was called. Because he was deserving? Hardly. Because of the grace of Christ! The grace of Christ becomes the only possible explanation for our call to be Christ's when we remember how much holiness we have missed, how far we have wandered from God's path of perfection, how great our sin is in the sight of God. Introit: "The Lord was my Stay: He brought me forth also into a large place."

C. Through His message of forgiveness Christ calls us now to follow Him. He did not only call men long ago. He calls us now by His message of sin forgiven. He tells us that the past sin of ours was wiped out by Him, our daily failures can find perfect cleansing, a right relationship with God can be established. That message is a call to accept Him as Savior and follow Him as Lord.

Conclusion

He has called us undeserving people on His own initiative and by His grace. Will we heed that call? But remember: No partial following or mere intellectual approval of Christ will do. He confiscates our entire life. His call is aimed at our heart and will. Happy the man who heeds the call of Christ!

TRINITY III

LUKE 15:11-32

Introduction

Like the weather, human sin can come in terrific extremes. At the one extreme there is the icy harshness of self-righteousness and at the other the hot-headed rebellion

against God. Both extremes are pictured in our text for today. But this is also pictured: the love of God can reach far enough in either direction to recover the sinner. God is the remedy for the sin of man in its every extreme and direction.

The Extremes of Man's Sin

I. *The Disobedient Life Which Stands in Need of God's Love (11-24)*

A. This sin is characterized by:

1. Waywardness. "and took his journey into a far country," v. 13. God sets us on His path. Yet we are prone to wander into ways of hate and envy and meanness, to stumble into the darkness of unbelief and skepticism. We do things that bring shame upon ourselves and discredit the name of Christ. All the wrong in our life can be called waywardness.

2. Wastefulness. "squandered his property in loose living," v. 13. Has not that been our experience? So many of the good and perfect gifts from our heavenly Father—wasted. The gift of time, frittered and whittled away; of money, squandered recklessly; of energy, drained down some useless enterprise; of opportunity to serve fellowman and glorify Christ, thrown carelessly away.

3. Worthlessness. As a consequence of waywardness and wastefulness, a feeling of worthlessness often follows. "I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (v. 19). Look up to God. See Him in His holy perfection. View the spotless, untarnished Christ. When we look down upon our blemished and shabby lives, must not we poor sinners confess our unworthiness?

B. God is the remedy for this sin.

1. He offers us acceptance. How does the father react to the son's return? (Vv. 18-24) That is God's answer to us as well. He simply accepts us. No penalties or fines are imposed that we must first pay. No

punishments are assigned that we must bear. No need for crawling back on hands and knees, or for slinking around to the back door and sneaking in to avoid the fearful glance of an angered father. Only God's free and full acceptance of the penitent sinner.

2. He accepts us because Christ has achieved our atonement. Human sin bars the way through the door of our Father's home. What does God do with human sin? In Christ He atones for it. Every punishment for our waywardness, every penalty for our wastefulness, all the guilt of our worthlessness was taken by Jesus to the cross. There He atoned for our sin. Thus He cleared the path to the Father's home. He made us at one with God. "He hath delivered my soul in peace" (Gradual). The atonement makes our acceptance possible.

II. *The Outwardly Obedient Life Which Also Stands in Need of God's Love* (25-32)

A. This sin is characterized by:

1. Pride of piety with respect to God. The elder son's motive was wrong. He claimed to have earned a place with his father by priding himself on his pious living (v. 29). Sometimes our Christianity becomes a set of duties and requirements we perform in order to achieve a position with God. When the wrong motive rules our heart, we are as lost as the foulest sinner who has strayed from God. "The far country is far in many directions; it is far in motives rather than in miles."

2. Haughty harshness with respect to fallen fellowmen. The elder son calls the prodigal son not "my brother" but "this son of yours" (v. 30). Our hearts can become harsh against those who are low and lawless, those who have no interest in religious matters, no concern for spiritual pursuits. Why should God's love be wasted on them?

Why should their repentance and return be a cause of celebration and joy?

B. The love of God is the answer to this sin of man.

1. He has already given us all things. "All that is mine is yours" (v. 31). Why should our obedience be an attempt to win something from God? He has already given us everything in Jesus. Without Christ's atoning death, nothing we do is sufficient to win a place with God, "nothing is strong, nothing is holy" (Collect). Everything is given by God: the forgiveness of sin, hope of heaven, eternal fellowship with God, Jesus Himself—these are all gifts of God which we can only receive.

2. He rejoices over reconciliation with man. Haughty harshness with respect to the recovered sinner—what is God's answer to that? (V. 32) How different from the coldness of those who resent it that the return of the wayward should be a cause of rejoicing. There is no joy like the joy of God. And He is never happier than when some son, some daughter, is one with Him again.

Conclusion

Which son are we? The younger who is wayward, wasteful, and worthless; or the elder who is proud and haughty? Most of us probably are found moving in both directions, now like the younger son, now like the elder. Wherever we are, Christ's hands are reaching out in both directions for us. Take His hand today. Use His atoning death as your key to the Father's home.

TRINITY IV

MATTHEW 5:13-16

Introduction

There is always a crucial connection between nature and function. If a lawyer fails to grasp the nature of his position, he is

apt to function as something other than a lawyer. Or if he understands clearly his nature and fails to function accordingly, he will be useless and worthless. So with the Christian. He has both nature and function. We could put the connection this way: Christ makes us His to function as His people in the world.

Be What You Are

I. *We Need to Realize What We Are. What Is Our Nature?*

A. We are spiritually beggars. That is the condition of the man whom the Lord calls "blessed" in vv. 1-6. They are shaken and crushed by their sin. They have nothing to offer to atone for their wrongdoing. They are spiritually empty-handed and bankrupt, stricken with poverty and shabbiness. Surely that is our spiritual condition — beggars.

B. Christ fills our need by giving us Himself. He fills our immense void with Himself. Our wrongdoing has left us penniless and impoverished before God, but Christ's forgiving work makes us rich and right before God. "The Lord is my Light and my Salvation" (Introit). In Christ all things are now ours: forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, life with God. "As having nothing," Paul said, "yet possessing all things."

C. Thus we are His disciples. We may possess Christ now, but so does He possess us. We do not in the first place belong to ourselves or to our loved ones. We belong to Christ. We are His disciples. "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." We need to grasp what our nature is. But what if the salt loses its flavoring quality, or if the light fails to shine?

II. *We Need to Be What We Are. What Is Our Function?*

A. We should be the salt of the earth.

1. Salt seasons our witness to the Gospel and makes it more acceptable to the world.

Salt flavors food and makes it tasty to the tongue. Our Christian love seasons the message of the Gospel we proclaim and makes it more acceptable to the unbeliever. The world is quick to note any discrepancy between what we say and what we do. When our message of Christ is flavored with a life of love, kindness, honesty, our words about the Gospel take on a taste that makes them more credible to the world.

2. Salt preserves the world and saves it from spiritual decay. When added to certain meats, salt preserves and protects against corruption. Our Christian lives have a preservative effect on the world and save it from moral corruption. The presence of righteous people could have saved the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Wanted today, for a corrupt and decaying world: Christian character. Compare the Gospel for today for a description of some aspects of the Christian life.

B. We should be the light of the world.

1. Light dispels darkness. When one thinks of all the darkness of unbelief in the world, our function becomes apparent: to hold up Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. Some are stumbling through the black night of ignorance, guilt, self-righteousness. Ours is the task to point them to Jesus, our Light.

2. Light illumines a person's path. The question is: Are we the kind of guiding lights for others that we should be? Moral principles, ethical standards, and religious beliefs are competing for the lives and minds of men. Do we throw beams of light on the one path that leads to God? Are we the beacons for a way of life that is pure and holy?

C. Our goal is to be what we are for the glory of God. Why be the salt of the earth and the light of the world? So that we become objects of praise? No. Rather, "for the glory of Thy name" (Gradual).

We are not to be like stained windows but rather like clear, clean glass through which people look up to God. Our function as salt and light has a purpose: v. 16.

Conclusion

Both nature and function make up the Christian. Spiritual beggars whose emptiness has been filled by Christ—that is who we are; that is our nature. Seasoning, preserving salt, and illuminating, guiding light—that is our function. When the two are combined and working, then the ancient prayer of the psalmist will be answered: “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name give glory.”

TRINITY 7

LUKE 9:18-26

Introduction

At the turn of the century it was common to say, “Christianity has been tried and found wanting.” To which G. K. Chesterton replied, “Christianity has been found hard, but not tried.” Today let us remind ourselves that what Christ calls for from us is not something easy, but hard. Christ calls for personal confession of faith and total obedience of life. That is not as easy as it sounds. It is hard.

The Hardness of Christianity

I. *Christ Calls for Personal Confession of Faith* (18b-22)

A. We sometimes avoid making a personal confession of faith:

1. By merely discussing Christ. That is what the people of Palestine were doing. Christ was under discussion everywhere; discussion, but rarely confession. It is easier for us to do that too. But all our talk about Christ is useless if there is not a time when our general discussion about Christ ends and this personal confession begins: “Thou

art the Christ of God; Thou art Jesus, my Savior.”

2. By simply offering Christ admiration and respect. That, also, is what the people of Palestine were doing. They were giving Christ high honor when they called Him Elijah, John the Baptist, one of the prophets. It is easier for us to do that too. To call Christ the finest example who ever pointed the way, the greatest teacher of ethics the world has ever known, the author of the highest form of religion in the history of man—how easy that is. But to take the claims of Christ seriously and confess Him as “God’s Christ, my Savior,”—that is much harder.

3. By repeating someone else’s idea of Christ. That is what Peter might have done. He might have answered Christ: “Well, all the people say You are John, or Elijah, or a prophet; so say I.” But the question is: “Who do you say that I am?” It is easier to borrow someone else’s creed and develop a secondhand faith. Note the emphasis in Christ’s question: “And you,” He said, “who do you say I am?” (NEB) “The Lord is my Light and my Salvation.” (Introit)

B. Our personal confession must center on the Christ who suffers for man.

1. Men want a Christ to glory in, a Christ of power. Jesus was and is a source of doubt to many because He was not a kingly Christ of earthly power and glory. The Jews wanted Christ to rule by the sword and overthrow the Romans. Jesus therefore guarded against any misconception about His task by declaring that He must soon suffer and die.

2. Jesus was a suffering Christ. The royal robe He wore covered a beaten and bleeding back. He was a sheep led to the slaughter, stricken, smitten, and afflicted. Yet His cross among us is a symbol of high honor, and this suffering Christ is the center of our confession, the focal point of our faith. Why? Because . . .

3. By His suffering and death He paid the ransom. By nature we are separated from God and under the dominion not of God — but of Satan. But God wants us to belong to Him. He sent Jesus to pay the ransom for our release. His suffering and death is the price He paid. Isn't it good to know that through Christ we can be one with God? Confess this suffering Christ as your personal Redeemer.

II. *Christ Summons the Ransomed Man of God to a Life in Line with God's Will* (23-26)

A. Our lives are lost if lived for our own sake (v. 24 a). What the hymn stanza says about our money — "We lose what on ourselves we spend" — applies to all areas of our life. If we live to fulfill our own pleasures, if the goals of our lives are selfish, we are lost.

B. Our lives are saved if lived for the will of God:

1. By denying ourselves (v. 23: "let him deny himself.") Let him say, "I do not even know myself. I know only Christ and His will and goal for my life."

2. By taking up our cross (v. 23: "let him . . . take up his cross daily"). Let him endure the crucifixion of evil inclinations that well up from our fallen nature. Let him risk the crucifixion of public abuse and hostility. Let him suffer the crucifixion of those deeds which war against the will of God. "I am crucified with Christ," said St. Paul.

3. By obedience (v. 23: ". . . and follow Me"). Peter in today's Gospel: "But at Your word I will let down the nets" (Luke 5:5). We hear a command of Christ. What then? "Please, Lord, someone else. Or, at some other time." Should it not rather be the response of obedience? "At Thy word it shall be done."

4. By being aware of our responsibility to a Lord who shall come again in judgment (v. 26). The Collect for today. Happy the Christian who so lives in line with God's will that one day he hears the voice of the Lord say, "Well done."

C. Christ Himself is the motive for the life lived for God. He gave His life to rescue us from condemnation. Our wrongdoing does not go unnoticed by God. He has displeasure and wrath for human sin. In our place, Christ became the target of God's wrath. He became the object of God's condemnation. He rescued us by taking upon Himself the consequences of our sin.

Conclusion

"The church is not a place where struggles end. It is a place where they begin." If we think Christianity is an easy affair, then we should start grappling with the hardness of it all. That means making personal confession of Christ and giving Him total obedience of life. Do that, and then you will be able to say: "Christianity has been tried, is found hard, and still is the most glorious thing in the world."

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