

Passion Sunday 2017

“Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your servant”. (St. Matt 20. 26)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In last week’s Gospel, we were shown a picture of ourselves. The crowd of five thousand plus, who came to the Lord Jesus and were miraculously fed by Him, were very much like us, and we like them. They came to Jesus with the same worries and fears that we have; the same temptations and sins; and the same sicknesses, and He ministered to them. He took the five barley loaves, and gave thanks to His Father; and then He began to brake them and distribute the pieces. In doing that, He showed Himself to be the Bread of Life; and He prefigured how He would feed His Church with the Holy Communion of His Body and Blood.

Today, in the Epistle, He shows us more. In order to provide for His Church, Christ, the Son of God, would take two roles familiar to the Jewish people. On the one hand, He would act as a High Priest; on the other hand, He would be the Victim. His Altar would be the Cross; and He Himself would be the Sacrifice.

In the Old Testament, there was a system of sacrifices. The priest offered these according to the specific details and rituals prescribed by God through His servant Moses. But as well intentioned as these sacrifices were, they could only render an external or moral cleansing. They provided a way for people to deal with their mistakes and offences, similar to the way the legal system operates in our culture. The problem was, the offender still carried their guilt on their conscience. No amount of burnt offerings or blood sprinkled from the sacrifices of goats and calves could bring the assurance of forgiveness required by the human soul. Like the crowd in last week’s Gospel, the Israelites were starving for peace – real peace and assurance. We, ourselves, know this hunger. When we are truly sorry, we look for a way to deal with our sins. We may make restitution; we may pay back what we owe; but we still need the assurance that we are forgiven. Until then we carry our guilt and shame around with us like a heavy sack.

For this reason – for the purpose of providing the way of forgiveness and peace -- God sent His only-begotten Son. Christ became one of us. He entered our world. He remained fully Divine, but He took on our humanity. He was the Second Person of the eternal Trinity in human form. He was like us in every way except

sin. Although He experienced intense temptations, Jesus never gave in. He was perfect, holy and sinless.

It is important to know this as we read this morning's Epistle. Christ came into this world in order to provide a Sacrifice – a Sacrifice that would cleanse not only the offender's legal and moral requirements, but also their deepest spiritual yearnings. Like a High Priest, the only-begotten Son of God came and presented Himself as the Sacrifice; and His Altar was the holy Cross.

The difference was that as the God-Man (holy and perfect – “without spot” -- fully God and fully man) Christ's Sacrifice had infinite value and power. Whereas the blood of bulls and goats could only satisfy the legal or moral requirements, Jesus' precious Blood cleanses us completely from the stain of sin. As today's Epistle says, “How much more shall the Blood of Christ...purify your conscience from dead works to serve the Living God?”

Martin Luther made this helpful comment: “The absolution (of the Old Covenant priest and system) rendered no one inwardly holy and just before God. Something beyond that was necessary to secure true forgiveness....But with the priesthood of Christ is true spiritual remission, sanctification and absolution....Christ's Blood has obtained for us pardon forever acceptable with God. God will forgive our sins for the sake of that Blood....Therefore we are forever holy and blessed before God.”

It is important to note how Luther emphasizes the restoration of our relationship with God. Through the Blood of Christ, our sins are actually removed – not just put aside, but removed. The 103rd Psalm speaks of this: “Look how wide the east is from the west, so far has He set our sons from us”. Likewise, in the chapter just previous to this morning's Epistle, the Lord says, “I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more”. (8.12) In this morning's Gospel, the Lord Jesus uses the word “ransom”. He is our High Priest; He is also the full, perfect and sufficient Sacrifice; and He is our Ransom. He said, “The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

This word ‘ransom’ helps us to understand how our sins actually bind us and captivate us. We are like hostages under their power. The devil holds us in spiritual darkness; in despair. We have no light or hope or peace, no way out, and

no forgiveness. We need to be ransomed. We need Someone to rescue or redeem us. As the comfortable words say, we need a 'propitiation' – a remedy; a Sacrifice. Mercifully, God provided this for us in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The other part of the Gospel is this: as the recipients and beneficiaries of that perfect Sacrifice, we are called to be followers of Christ. That's what a Christian is: a follower of Christ. In doing that, we must understand that the Kingdom of God is much different from the way of this world. Jesus says that to us this morning: "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great, exercise authority upon them, but it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant."

It is interesting that the lead-up to the Lenten Season also began with this message. The Gospel for Septuagesima Sunday – the one about the workers hired for the vineyard – closes with, "The last shall be first, and the first last". The point is that, as followers of Christ, the Ransomer, we are called to a different way. Mark Ross, a Presbyterian Minister and Bible Scholar puts it this way: "How easily are we offended when we do not receive the honour and respect we think we deserve. How different is the mindset of Jesus, and He calls us to the same mindset as He has. ...Thinking more highly of ourselves than we should will lead to division among the people of God. It is love and humility that bind us together."

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. May the Lord help us to enter more into His holy, perfect and life-giving way. May He help us to mold our desires and our plans into His will as we move into these last two weeks of Lent and go with Him to Jerusalem and to the Cross.

And now unto God Almighty: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost...