

### 3.18.2018 Passion Sunday (Hebrews 9:11-15; John 8:46-59)

It's been 35 years, but I still remember one terrifying and hilarious event that occurred on that summer evening, like it was yesterday. Earlier that day, I'd taken my fly pole and visited a few of my favorite fishing holes on the South Fork of the Kaweah river, but as I made my way up and down it's rocky shores, I found the water was still too high to reach every place I normally fished. Ordinarily that wouldn't have bothered me, I'd just wait patiently for the water level to drop over the next few weeks and fish those holes at that time. However, on this particular day, my sixth sense (the one that tells me where the fish are hiding) wouldn't let me leave well enough alone. I knew where the big fish were, and had to find a way to get there.

What stood between where I was, and where I wanted to be, was a narrow gorge with water flowing swiftly through it. I knew that I couldn't jump across, and so, I decided to wait for my dad to get home hoping that he'd be able to come up with a plan. He didn't let me down. He took a look at what we were now up against, and in a manner of minutes, we each had a fishing pole in hand and were carrying a 16 foot long fence board down to the river. This board, that back then cost about twelve bucks, would serve as our bridge to the other side.

Now I've made some bad decisions in my life, but that day I got it right, I let my dad go first. Even now, if I close my eyes and really concentrate, I can hear the sound of that fence board slipping off that granite rock. I can see my dad getting his ticket punched for the ride of his life, his body helplessly shooting down that flume, and finally, in the pool that all the raging water was flowing into, two cowboy boots, like a couple of miniature submarines, rising up and breaking the surface of the water. The end of that ill-conceived plan was one of the funniest things I've ever witnessed, and this morning I would suggest the events of that day can help communicate the truth about where we are, where we want to be when this journey ends, and the only Bridge that is able to get us there.

Generally speaking, our culture finds no fault in an individual's desire, at the end of this life, to attain heaven, because like a boy who just knows that the big fish are on the other side of that narrow gorge, most people will admit

that mankind has a deep sense of longing for so much more than this broken world has to offer. Over the course of our lives, we journey up and down rocky shores that lead to careers, money, possessions... All of which ultimately leaves us unfulfilled. We are constantly in search of that place where rest, peace, and the God-given desires of our heart will at last be found. So, the difficulties and disagreements between the many religions and various spiritual disciplines that we find in this world are not normally centered around where we want to go, but in how we get there from here.

How do we get there from here? I believe the answer to that question should be at the center of every sermon, and as we continue our march toward the events of Holy Week and Easter Day, what we discover in the Scripture readings appointed for this Passion Sunday is an emphasis on that which makes Jesus Christ the only way to get there from here. He is our bridge to God, and the verses we read this morning are a priceless gift from our Father in Heaven, given to those who seek Him, that they may, by His grace, step out in faith with the assurance that His Son will carry them home. Now, these passages are so filled with meaning that we cannot begin to unfold them in this short discussion, but let's consider two comforting truths, presented in these verses, that invite us to place our full weight on the bridge to God, which is Christ our Lord.

The first truth is this: Jesus Christ is fully human. At Christmas we celebrate His birth, on Good Friday we commemorate His death, and in the Bible we read about the countless people who saw, heard, touched, and shared their lives with a very human Jesus of Nazareth. His humanity is also clearly presented in the Gospel we read this morning. When speaking with the Jews, Jesus said, *"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto Him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?"* (John 8:56-57). They misunderstood his words, but their point is clear: They knew Jesus to be a man who was not yet fifty years old, Abraham had been dead for 2,000 years, and therefore Jesus couldn't have seen Abraham, and Abraham couldn't have seen Him.

Our Epistle reading also refers to Christ's human nature. The inspired writer to the Hebrews states: *"But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that*

*is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.*” (Hebrews 9:11-12). These verses identify Jesus Christ as our High Priest, the Mediator of the New Covenant, the One who intercedes on our behalf with Almighty God. These verses also declare the truth that Christ is not only our High Priest, He is the Sacrifice, the Victim whose body was given and whose blood was shed, once for all, that He may enter that holy place to obtain eternal redemption for us.

In our Gospel, in our Epistle, and throughout the pages of Holy Scripture, the true and full humanity of Jesus is unquestioned. This is the first truth that we are presented with today, and here’s the second: Jesus Christ is fully God. For evidence of this inconceivable truth, that the Divine Word of God spoken at creation *“was made flesh, and dwelt among us”* (John 1:14), we turn once again to our Gospel reading. After the Jews said to Jesus, *“Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?”* Jesus answered, *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am”* (John 8:58).

When Moses stood in the presence of Almighty God, near the burning bush on Mount Horeb, He asked for God’s name, that he might tell the people who sent him. God answered, *“... say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you”* (Exodus 3:14). As Jesus stood in front of the Jews on that day, He claimed this name as His own, and in doing so, revealed the truth to the Jews, and to mankind, that there was a time when we were not, but there was never a time when He was not. In the time before us, in the time before Abraham, in the eternity before time began, Jesus Christ already was. He is *“the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end”* (Revelation 22:13).

There are people in our society who will try to mislead you by saying that Jesus never claimed to be God, yet this example is just one of several that we find in the Gospels, and those who heard Him speak that day knew exactly who He was claiming to be. In fact, that’s the reason they took up *“stones to cast at Him.”* The Jews were going to kill this man, Jesus, for claiming to be God. To them, this was blasphemy, but by His miraculous power He hid Himself, and *“went out of the temple, going through the midst of them”* (John 8:59).

In the Scriptures appointed for today, there is clearly an emphasis on both the human nature, and the Divine nature, which are each fully present in the Person of Jesus Christ. As we prepare to commemorate His death, and celebrate His resurrection, we should ask ourselves why the truth that Jesus is fully God, and fully man, is at the center of this service. For a simple explanation, I would ask you to consider once again that summer evening when my dad chose to step out onto a makeshift bridge to reach the other side, placing his faith in something that would, in the end, fail him.

On that summer evening, the end result of misguided faith was a good laugh, but when our days on this earth are complete, if we have stepped out onto a bridge that is unable to carry us home, the eternal consequences are not funny at all. By emphasizing the full humanity and the full Divinity of our Lord and Savior, the liturgy of the Church seeks to assure the people of God that Jesus Christ is who He says He is: *“The Way, the Truth, and the Life.”* By the grace of God, we place our faith in Him. We believe Him when He says, *“No one comes to the Father except through Me”* (John 14:6).

No one is able to come to the Father except through His Son, because perfect atonement for the punishment we deserve requires that which only the God-man is able to provide. We can step out onto that bridge to God, which is Jesus Christ, because of His full humanity (body, blood, and soul), because He bore our sins *“in His own body on the Cross”* (1 Peter 2:24), *“the Just for the unjust”* (1 Peter 3:18). As a man, He is able to die as our substitute. The word of God spoken through the prophet Isaiah (53:5) speaks of the substitutionary aspect of Christ’s sacrifice, saying this about our Lord: *“He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on Him, and by His wounds we are healed.”* At the near end, the bridge to God is anchored in the full humanity of Jesus.

As we step out onto that bridge and journey toward our Father’s kingdom, what we find in the full Divinity of our Lord is the assurance that the far end of the bridge is anchored in God Himself. On the Cross at Calvary, the history of the world was forever changed because of the eternal, Trinitarian nature of the Atonement. As we read in our Epistle, *“How much more shall*

*the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”* (Hebrews 9:14). The truth that our Savior was never brought into being, but has always existed with the Father and the Spirit in the eternity before time began, offers infinite value to the Atonement. The spotless, eternal Lamb of God, who was slain “*before the foundation of the world*” (Revelation 13:8), provides what no other sacrifice can: true holiness and the ability to declare once, and for all, “*It is finished*” (John 19:30).

“*It is finished.*” The dying words of our Lord, cried out from the Cross, are an emphatic proclamation that the work of our redemption is complete. Our Father knew what we were up against. He knew that we couldn’t jump across the gulf that separated us from Him. He knew that we couldn’t build a bridge of good works that would carry us back to Him. He knew that “*with man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*” (Matthew 19:26). We could not reach out to Him, so He reached out to us through His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2). By His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, our Lord, the God-man, bridged that great gulf between the Infinite, Holy Creator, and the finite, fallen creature. This is the truth of the Gospel, and the blessed assurance that He provides to all who place their faith in Him.