

Over the course of Lent as we considered the narrative of Christ's passion and as we rehearsed the stations of the cross, it may have seemed as though we were drawn to consider a series of evils visited upon Our Lord. He stands silent before his accusers and is hesitant to answer those who pass judgment. He is dragged from place to place and ill-treated at every opportunity. The figure of Christ struggling under the weight of the cross, stumbling and requiring help is pitiful to contemplate. We mourn the injustice and cruelty of those who mock the dying man crying out for water, only to be given vinegar. And the final despairing cry, "My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?" seems to be the ultimate indication of Our Lord's undeserved and unlooked-for suffering.

To be sure, there is truth in this. Christ's passion is the most unjust punishment of the most righteous man that has ever been. Our Lord did stand meekly before his tormenters "as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth." (Isa. 53:7)

Yet, the great festival of Easter reminds us that, there is another aspect to all of this humble submission to the wickedness of sinful men. For, Our Lord is not an unwitting scapegoat, or a small-time revolutionary destroyed by the strength of the Roman Empire. He is no mere martyr. In the account of Our Lord's passion we ought also to read the story of a battle being waged and Christ securing a final and climactic victory.

Our Lord is at each stage of his passion choosing to uphold the will of God and enact all the prophecies which have been made concerning this event. Jesus accepts his betrayal at the hands of Judas, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah, "So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver." He refused to respond to his accusers as Isaiah had prophesied. Each time Christ speaks from the cross he is either fulfilling prophecy or pronouncing blessing upon those around him. Even the anguished cries of, "I thirst" and "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" are fulfillments of prophecies about the Messiah in Psalm 22. At every stage our Lord is choosing his path, he is embracing the suffering, marching resolutely in spite of the pain toward the victory and the glory which awaits Him on the other side. When he cries, "it is finished" he is declaring an end to his work, not his pain! It is accomplished. "I lay down My life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father."

Our Easter celebrations recolor all of our Holy Week meditations, just as Our Lord's resurrection recasts the demonstration of his wounds. When Jesus shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and feet and side, this is occasion for great rejoicing. Those marks which were days before symbols of the domination of sin and death, are now the Holy testimonies of Our Lord's triumph. As John says in our epistle lesson, "his is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood."

Our lessons for this second week of Easter direct us to a further contemplation Christ's victory by describing how Christ's victory is communicated to His people. We are drawn up into the triumph of God and are made

participants in it. "Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?" And the testimony of Water and Blood and the Holy Ghost is the foundation of that belief.

Water is used for cleansing. In the Old Testament covenant it was required for both physical and ritual cleansing, as a prerequisite for worship. This same image of the cleansing which water accomplishes is applied to Christ's work in the church. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word." (Eph 5:25-26) The testimony of water is the removal of the guilt of sin from the people of God. The blight and blemish which had marred all mankind after the fall of the first Adam, was by the second Adam washed away.

However, John emphatically adds that Christ came not by water only, but by water and the blood. In Genesis 9, God explains that "The blood is the life." The offering of blood under the law of Moses was intended to figure the offering not of death, but of *life* (Levit. xvii. 14). And so, the blood of Christ given for us is his new life within us.

We need, therefore, not merely the new birth of water, but something higher and yet more vital. Having received life, we need it "more abundantly" (John 10:10). It is to be remembered that everywhere "the blood is the life," the life of the Risen and Ascended Lord, and partaking of the blood we abide in the living Christ and He in us. This is the closest communion with Christ. We are not to be satisfied with the mere cleanliness of the water, but to desire both "the water and the blood," sin's "double cure."

This is what Paul describes in the language of the old man and the new man. In Ephesians we read, "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." (Eph 4:22-23) The Christian life is characterized by this double motion. We are no longer slaves to sin, but we are now slaves to righteousness. To merely put away sin is to only half participate in the redemption of Christ. Paul goes on to describe the responsibility of the Christian emphasizing these two cooperative responsibilities. "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with *his* hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth." Theft is rejected as sinful, and then in turn replaced with hard work and generosity. "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers." Corrupt talk is traded for edifying speech. And finally, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." Wrath gives way to forgiveness and kindness. This is the Christian model. Washed clean from sin by the water, and enlivened by the blood of Christ which is his life.

All of this is made possible by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose work is to take the eternal work of Christ and apply it to the church. This is further reflected in our Gospel, as Christ breathes on the apostles, he says

“Receive ye the Holy Ghost”. His commission to the Apostles to carry his work out into the world is accompanied by this breath which is the Spirit of God. The work of the church is the work which the Spirit accomplishes through and in the people of God. Pentecost is the inaugural event of the Church, because it is by the work of the Spirit that the church operates. The Spirit makes present in the world and in the hearts of God’s people the redemption which God accomplished through Jesus.

Thus, Our Lord’s commission is combined with the command to His ministers to make present to the people the forgiveness and judgement of God – “Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained.” Jesus is not here saying that the apostles have the authority in themselves to redeem and condemn. Rather, the apostles are responsible as those enlivened by the Holy Ghost to bring to the people God’s forgiveness – to pronounce it over them for their comfort, and to make available to them the sacramental means by which it is communicated. Additionally, the apostles are given the task of pronouncing the judgement of God upon the unrepentant sinner. They are meant to carry on the work which Christ accomplished in his earthly ministry – both of forgiveness and judgement – that the world might be reconciled to God. This work was entrusted by God the Father to God the Son, The Son in giving the Holy Ghost to the apostles gave it to them and the church’s ministers even to this day, as inheritors of the apostles ministry, are responsible now to carry on this same work.

This is the final meaning of the witness of the Water and the Blood and the Holy Spirit. The church’s continued participation in the victory which Christ accomplished is enacted through its faithfulness in the sacramental office entrusted to it. The sacraments of water – Baptism – and blood – Holy Communion – are the mechanisms by which the Holy Ghost imparts to us Faith and the resurrection life of Christ. The life imparted by the Spirit, the Water, and the Blood is the perpetual witness to the Son of God. This testimony is not the witness of men, but the witness of God in men, and yet comes through men, for each believer has the witness in him. As life proceeds from life, so the Risen Christian proves a Risen Christ to be the source of his Christianity, and the growth of the Church is an ever-increasing witness to Christ, a perpetual miracle.