

Quinquagesima - Luke 18

Jesus told the disciples to look toward Jerusalem. Look to what the Prophets wrote about. Look at what is about to happen. The Son of Man will be handed over to the gentiles. They will mock and insult him, spit on him, whip him, and put him to death. On the third day he will rise again. He told them to look at it, to behold with their eyes what God's Word says must happen. But they could not look. His words remained hidden from them. Seeing, they could not see, and hearing they could not understand.

This seems to contradict what we heard Jesus say last week in Luke chapter 8. There he said to his disciples, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of God's kingdom." Now, in the eighteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel, we hear that the great mystery of God's kingdom, the passion, crucifixion, and resurrection of God's dear Son in the flesh, was hidden from them. How is this? Should we take from this that the disciples were without any faith at all? Had they fallen away? If we assumed this, then we would be missing the great warning of this account. You see, Luke is describing the deep unbelief of the sinful flesh, which still clings even to those who believe. The disciples believe in Jesus. But their sinful flesh doesn't.

In fact, the sinful flesh hates these words of Jesus. St. Paul says that the Word of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Cor 1:18). The mind set on the flesh is hostility against God (Rom 8:7). This is what we need to understand. It is what we learn about in the season of Lent. The heart naturally lusts after earthly things, and it despises what God reveals in his Son. When I was a little kid, I told my mom that when I prayed I couldn't help but think about other things. I told her that I couldn't help it. Her response bothered me. She said, "That's called sin." That hurt my feelings. After all, I said that I couldn't help it. I said that I didn't want to be distracted. But I needed to hear this from my mom. I needed to hear that my problem wasn't just a failure to pay attention or a tendency to get distracted. No, I needed to hear that the reason I forget to focus on what my Savior has taught me, the reason I fail to understand its importance, the reason I easily look away from what my Savior is telling me to look at is all because of sin. It is that deep, dark, wicked hostility of my natural heart, which still clings to me.

We need to recognize how blind our sinful nature still is. How quickly do we forget the weight of the words we say every week? He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. These words become familiar to everyone who recites them week in and week out. But the more we know these words the more our sinful flesh despises them. Our Old Adam who still clings to our dying bodies, does not need to be reformed. He doesn't just need to be whipped into shape. If that's all we needed, then we wouldn't need these words of our Savior at all.

After all, look at who handed Jesus over. They were the Sadducees and Pharisees, the members of the Jewish Council. They lived by outward virtues. But as Jesus said, they were white-washed tombs, beautiful on the outside but only dead on the inside.

Or consider whom the Jews handed Jesus over to! The Romans were one of the most civilized of ancient people. Sure, by this time they were devolving into a decadent empire, but they were not barbarians. They were refined and educated.

Yet, this is what the world did to Jesus. They handed him over and crucified him. This is what the flesh does to the Savior, no matter how outwardly religious and refined it appears to be. The blindness and ignorance, which distract us from paying attention to this Word of the Cross, is nothing short of hostility toward the Lord.

The world is impressive. They have class. They have skills. They have a sense of order and justice. But Jesus tells us to look at what the world has done, and as we look at what the world

has done, we are looking at what our own sinful desires have done. Look at the hostility against the Savior. Look at the mocking and insulting, the spitting, the whipping, and the crucifixion. Look at what your own sinful nature can't see. Look at it with eyes of faith, a circumcised heart, a humble mind given by none other than the Spirit of the living God. Behold with faith God's only Son. Come nigh and see what Love has done to save thee from damnation. The Father cast on Him thy guilt. For thee His precious blood was spilt to bless thee with salvation.

Our carnal eyes can't see what faith sees. They only get distracted by the cares and pleasures of life. These carnal eyes can't be reformed. They can't be convinced to look at Christ, his cross, and his resurrection with faith, hope, and adoring love. Instead, these carnal eyes must be made blind so that we can receive sight only from Jesus. We must see ourselves as beggars before God, desiring nothing but his mercy and kindness in Christ. We can't figure it out. We can't make it palatable to our flesh or to this dying world. Instead, the Holy Spirit teaches us to put these things to death. Put to death the envy and lust of the eyes, which are drawn away from our Lord Jesus Christ. Put to death the anger and hatred, which only puff you up with pride and make you forget your need for God's mercy. These affections and desires of the world and the sinful flesh can't be reformed. They need to die. This is why we were crucified with Christ in our baptism. And every day we are considered sheep for the slaughter. Our Lord teaches us to repent, to deny ourselves and daily pick up our cross, to be blind to our own righteousness and importance, and look only to the righteousness of our Savior who gave his life for our sins.

As they approached Jericho there was a blind man begging on the side of the road. He found out that Jesus of Nazareth was coming. But he didn't see merely a famous guy from Nazareth. When he heard it was Jesus his faith recognized the promised Lord, the Son of David, the Savior who was sent into the world. Because he believed he also spoke. He cried out for mercy. To the seemingly respectable people of this world, the man was making a fool out of himself. They urged him to be quiet. Have some dignity. Don't embarrass yourself. Act civilized. But faith clings only to the promise of the Savior, regardless of how foolish this might look to the world. The world hates Jesus. Why should you take advice from them on how to pray to Jesus?

The fact is that this blind beggar's prayer was more refined than any prayers offered by the most civilized priest. He speaks with confidence. He calls Jesus what the prophets called him, the promised Son of David. He calls him the Lord. And he asks for mercy. This is no lazy, generic prayer, with an uncertain aim or focus. It doesn't have a bunch of fillers and awkward pauses, as if he doesn't know what he's saying. No, his prayer is clear. Jesus, Son of David, he says, have mercy on me!

What makes this prayer clear is the faith it flows out of. The blind man wants to see. And when Jesus causes him to see, then the man follows Jesus. The blind man didn't want to see just for the sake of seeing. He wanted to see Jesus. His faith burned for Jesus, to follow him all the way to Jerusalem, to see him arrested, mocked, spit upon, and crucified. Perhaps this blind man didn't understand all of this yet either. But his faith was clinging to the Savior, with the confidence that whatever Jesus does it will be for his mercy on poor, sinful beggars. This is why the blind man's faith saved him. It saved him, because it held onto the words of the prophets, the promises of the Savior. It is only this faith that can look to the cross of the Christ and find comfort and healing in his wounds.

When you recite the creed, this is what your faith does. When you say, "was crucified, died, and was buried," faith cries out, "for me!" When you say, "on the third day he rose from the dead, and he ascended into heaven," faith embraces it as the greatest treasure. Don't expect your sinful nature to see what Jesus invites you to see in his gospel. Instead, repent of the sin that still clings

to you. Repent of the blindness. And look with faith to what Jesus reveals in his passion. Find in him, in his body and blood, in his Spirit and Word, a true refuge from sin and death. Let us pray:

If my sins give me alarm

And my conscience grieve me,

Let Thy cross my fear disarm,

Peace of conscience give me.

Grant that I may trust in Thee

And Thy holy Passion.

If His Son so loveth me,

God must have compassion. Amen.