

1 Sexagesima – 1 Cor 11&12; Luke 8

In Catechism class, we learn about the humiliation and the exaltation of Jesus. His humiliation is when he put himself under the law, hid his divine glory, and did not fully use his divine powers. From his birth to his death, Jesus was in his state of humiliation so he could suffer and die for us. His exaltation began after he said, “It is finished,” died, and was buried in the tomb. Here he began to use all of his divine powers. He proclaimed victory over hell, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven where he fully uses his divine authority to intercede for us, remain with us in his gospel and sacraments, and cover us with his righteousness.

Two weeks ago, we observed the Transfiguration of our Lord. He took Peter, James, and John up to a high mountain and was transfigured before them. His face shown like the sun, and his clothes were as bright as light. Jesus was showing what he truly looks like as the Son of God in his exalted state. Here he shows himself to be the Lord who dwells in inaccessible light. No man can see his face and live, because he is the living and holy God of hosts. But then he went down the mountain with his disciples, instructing them not to tell anyone until he had risen from the dead. After showing what he truly looks like in his glorious and exalted form, he returned to the form of a servant. He returned to his state of humiliation. This teaches us that until we see our Lord in all his glory, we must see him only by faith. Before we can behold him exalted in heaven, we must first know him with humble and contrite hearts here on earth. We know him through his Word, which is easily ignored and rejected by this world. As the Father spoke from heaven, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.”

This is therefore how we live in this earthly life. We listen to the Word of our Savior. And just as Jesus hid his heavenly beauty under the humble form of a servant, his Holy Spirit does the same thing. The Word of God in itself is a sharp two-edged sword, piercing through bone and marrow, separating soul and spirit, bringing all thoughts into judgment. In itself, the Word of God is exultated, as far from our reach as heaven is from the earth. But just as our glorious Lord Jesus came down from the mountain to take again the form of a servant and to bear the cross for all sinners, the Holy Spirit does something similar through the Word. That Word, which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart has imagined, comes down to us in the form of a servant. And just as our Lord hid his glory in the form of his cross where he bore our sins, his Spirit and Word bear with us in our crosses and trials here on earth.

St. Peter reports to us his eyewitness testimony of the Transfiguration. He says that he and the other disciples were not telling a myth or some made up story. They themselves saw the glory of the Lord when he was transfigured before them. They saw his exalted state. St. Paul reports to us two similar events he experienced.

First, we have Paul’s conversion on his road to Damascus. Jesus appeared to him in his exalted state. His glory was so overwhelming that Paul went blind, and the men who were with Paul couldn’t hear what Jesus was saying.

Second, Paul tells us of another experience. Not long after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was taken up to heaven. Whether he was in his body or out of his body, Paul

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couldn't tell. Only God knew. When he was there, he heard things that cannot be spoken of and no man can utter. In other words, Paul heard the Word of God in its exalted state. No eye has seen it, no ear has heard it, and human reason has not grasped it. This is the Word of God in its heavenly form. It is the Word of God as we will hear it when we are in God's glory, living with Jesus in our exalted bodies.

In the meantime, the Word comes to us in a state of humiliation, so to speak. St. Paul goes on to explain that he was given a thorn in the flesh, a servant of Satan to harass him. He doesn't tell us what this thorn is exactly. Perhaps he is describing some kind of physical ailment. He could be describing false teachers who continually undermine him and contradict his preaching. It could be a number of things. After all, he had just given a long list of his trials, misfortunes, and dangers, like hunger, shipwrecks, anxiety over the state of the church, false brothers, and a host of other things. Whatever it was, this thorn was continually nagging at Paul. He begged the Lord Jesus to remove it from him. But the Lord responded, "My grace is enough for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness."

This teaches us how the Word of God works among us here on earth. It is the powerful Word of God. It never returns empty. It always accomplishes what it sets out to accomplish. It is more powerful than anything in heaven or earth, stronger than all the forces of hell. And yet, it doesn't seem to be very strong from our perspective here on earth. It often seems weak and even foolish.

Jesus' parable of the Sower and the seed illustrates this for us. The Sower went out to sow his seed. He just threw his seed wherever he went. Some fell along the road. Some fell on the rock. Some fell among the thorns. Some fell on good soil. The Word of God goes wherever God scatters it. This is because God is generous with his Word. He gives his richest and most powerful gift to the ungrateful. And this sinful world confuses such generosity with wastefulness.

Those along the road immediately reject it, because, like the birds eating the seed, the devil snatches the Word out of their hearts. They see no usefulness for God's Word at all. Religion, after all, is the cause of too much fighting. We're better off following our own goodwill, putting our heads together. Then we can make the world a better place without being held back by religious rules. So think those who sit along the road.

Those on the rocks believe the Word for a while, but they don't have any depth. They enjoy the emotional thrill God's Word initially gives them, but they aren't willing to learn. Maybe they call themselves Jesus freaks, on fire for the Lord, able to run against an army. But they confuse their emotions with the Holy Spirit himself. Learning the details of Christian doctrine bores them. Who cares whether baptism saves you or whether it is just an outward sign. As long as I love the Lord, right? Who cares whether the Lord's Supper is the true body and blood of Jesus or simply represents the body and blood of Jesus. As long as I feel the Lord's presence in my heart, right? Who cares about the difference between this or that denomination. As long as we all say we have Jesus, then shouldn't that be enough? The difference between the law and the

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gospel, men and women, works and faith, or any number of doctrinal distinctions – they're just irrelevant details. Just keep the fire going in your heart, and you'll be fine. So think those who sit on the shallow soil of the rock.

But if you aren't willing to dig deeply and learn the details of God's Word, then you are no better in the end than those scoffers on the road who only care about their own thoughts. Those on the rock are driven from one false teaching to the next. They are deceived into thinking that they are strong Christians even though they are neglecting the weighty instructions of God's Word. So once real trials come and attack their faith they dry up and lose their faith. They relied on their own feelings, but those feelings quickly went cold.

Those among the thorns are those who receive the Word, but they are like those who have been going to church their whole lives. Christian habits have become only that – habits. They mouth the Creed and the confession. They go through Confirmation and learn the right answers to the questions. They make room for God's Word in their schedule. They might even attend church every week. They don't hate God's Word. It's just that it isn't their priority. They grow so used to God's Word that it becomes a common thing to them no different than a walk in the park. Meanwhile, other things take the seat of importance in their hearts. Maybe you start dating someone, and things are going well. But at no time do you consider what God's Word has to say or what your girlfriend even thinks about Christian doctrine. Perhaps you are still going to church from time to time, but that's only because this habit has been engrained in you. Eventually you're living in sin, and when someone tells you that you are contradicting God's Word you get angry. Or maybe you start a business and work hard, and you are so consumed in your work that devotions at home and gathering with your fellow saints become afterthoughts. Again, you might come to church once in a while. Or you might even come quite often, but only as long as it fits into your busy schedule.

Those among the thorns often have their lives in pretty good order. They usually have a good family life. They are devoted fathers and mothers. They volunteer in their children's extracurricular activities. They might even be generous with their time and money. But God's Word reigns in them less and less. Like the father in that song "Cat's in the Cradle" who is always promising his son that they will spend time together but never prioritizes it, those among the thorns promise God that they will get together soon, but they are overwhelmed by the cares and pleasures of life, which seem much more pressing.

These three types of soil demonstrate the humble state the Word of our Lord takes in this world. It is easily rejected, easily misused, and easily neglected. We all find ourselves in these types of soil in various parts of our lives. We are surrounded by a world that scoffs at Christian doctrine. Our sinful flesh never believes it. And we easily get bored with it. The desire remains in our sinful flesh to find comfort and peace in earthly things rather than in the gospel.

And yet, this only reinforces how powerful the Word of God is. Despite the humble state it takes in this world, despite how weak it seems to our sinful nature, it continues to work through the

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weakness. It overcomes the sluggish and stubborn will of our natural desires, and it teaches us to fight against these temptations. In this way, it prepares us to face even greater trials. If Jesus came in weakness to bear the cross to take away our sins, the his Word comes to bear with us in our weakness to cover up our sins.

St. Paul says that the Scriptures are comforting and patient. The Word of God remains with us, bearing with us, training us, teaching us to repent and directing our hearts to rely on the sure promise that we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The Word isn't weak. No. In fact, the Word is so strong that it is not afraid to face our weaknesses. When we must battle against temptation or facing the mocks, deceit, and apathy of this dying world, the seed of God's Word helps us stand with deep roots in the soil that God himself prepares.

In this way, our Lord's power is made perfect in weakness. That Word, which is exalted on high, which no man may utter, and no mind may understand, comes to us in the depths of our weakness, calls us to repentance, gives us faith and understanding, and strengthens us in the assurance of our salvation. It is in this way that God gives to us the knowledge of the mystery of his kingdom. We therefore pray with confidence that his kingdom would come to us, that his Holy Spirit would graciously descend and cause us to believe his Word and walk the humble path our Lord Jesus has walked for us. When you pray for this, then God teaches you the true power of his Word. So receive this saving Word with meekness and humility. Even when your faith is weak, his Word remains strong. You may therefore be confident that God will exalt you in his good time. Amen.