

REFLECTING ON THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

Hear the Word of God for this Judica Sunday, as this Church turns from her week of rejoicing to a more intense week of remembering God's judgment of vindication for His people through Christ's death in our sins:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and ashes of (a) young female calf having been continually sprinkled [upon] defiled persons holifies through the purity of the flesh, by how much more the blood of the Christ, Who through (the) eternal Spirit offered Himself spotless to God, will cleanse the conscience of us (you) from dead works into religious service to (the) living God.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Before and around you hang visual reminders that the Lenten season has shifted again to intense penitential reflection. The purple of mourning and royalty has returned to fully adorn the Chancel and our vestments. Black, which reminds us of ashes used for grieving, humiliation and repentance, veils crosses in the Nave. For 14 days beginning today, we who have had a week to participate in penitential joy now are being turned to remember that, in ourselves, there is nothing deemed worthy enough to move God to vindicate us sinners before the face of our enemies: sin, death and the devil. This week – with its colors, its veils, its readings – is driving us toward even more intense days of scarlet and black, palms and bare altar, incense of repentant prayers, new fire and readings which move us hearers of the Word from the Creator's work in creation, and from its Fall, to re-creation.

As we prepare for that which the Church has known for a century or so as Holy Week, this Sunday causes us to fast even more deliberately as we receive the Lord's Services. You have already heard about our "eye-fast" through mention of the veiled crosses. In addition, one more public witness to the joy we have in Christ has been purposefully removed this week from God's service to us. What is missing today from the Lord's Service that has been available for us to proclaim every Sunday of the year prior to this day?

¹ Hebrews 9:13.

It is the Gloria Patri that is normally proclaimed during the public readings of the Psalms. Those familiar “glory be...” words were added centuries ago to the public reading of the Psalms. That was done to assist the hearers of the Word to remember that the triune God is the true Author Who inspired the Psalm writers. Today they are gone! Their absence is part of the greater fast that we are free to participate in this time of year.

All of that is because, long ago, the fathers of the Church determined it was in the best interest of the hearers of the Word this Lenten week each year to begin truly and intensely reflecting on the Passion of our Lord. Prior to the late AD 1970s in confessional Lutheran churches, the Passiontide had traditionally been two weeks long. (It appears that which is called “Passion Week” dates no earlier than the 19th century. That innovation was apparently presented to the Church by Anglicans. Also, it seems that the Roman Church, with the Second Vatican Council in the early AD 1960s, helped to codify this historically innovative remembrance in Western churches).

Liturgical historians of the Church indicate that the earliest extended commemoration of the Passion of Jesus Christ lasted 14 days (Reed, 1947, 496). This is the time of year, since AD 2006 in this place and before 1978 in most LCMS congregations, when our readings begin to vividly declare the persecutions and sufferings of Jesus on our behalf. To assist God’ people in our reception of the treasures unveiled in the Word of God, this is the traditional Sunday to practice that which was taught earlier: veil the crosses and any statues and remove the Gloria Patri. The veiling in particular is done to jar us into remembering that we in ourselves are not worthy of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. The Word of God declares:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and ashes of (a) young female calf having been continually sprinkled [upon] defiled persons holifies through the purity of the flesh, by how much more the blood of the Christ, Who through (the) eternal Spirit offered Himself spotless to God, will cleanse the conscience of us (you) from dead works into religious service to (the) living God.²

Images, colors and helpful Church traditions are not dead works which do not

² Hebrews 9:13.

save. Of course, in themselves they have no power to save. Yet, they may be used to point us to the One Who shed His blood to cleanse our conscience so often soiled by sin. They are gifts to the Church, to you, to help you communicate to the generations that follow that which God has done and continues to do for those who are, in themselves, unworthy of His grace. They are part of our religious service to the living God. The inspired writer of Hebrews sums this up when the Word declares:

*Then, on account of this, (a) New Covenant Mediator He remains, in order that death having come for redemption for the ones transgressing under the First Covenant, the Promise of the eternal inheritance may have been received by the ones having been called.*³

That statement alone is so powerful for those, you, who are with one conscience cleansed from dead works into religious service (λατρευειν) to the God Who is eternally living. It declares that there is One who vindicates you before God the Father, and your right response to Him.

Christ Jesus alone, of all the sons of Adam born through woman, stands as eternal Mediator between you and God. He takes that which you have done – namely breaking all of God’s Holy Commandments (to break one is to violate them all) – and cleanses you from them with His blood. An ancient theologian who was known for his golden tongue through the centuries still declares of Christ the Mediator, “The Father willed not to leave us this inheritance, but was enraged against us... [the Son] accordingly became Mediator between us and Him, and prevailed with Him.”⁴ This text declares God’s answer to the cry of today’s Introit Psalm:

*Vindicate me, O Elohim, and defend my cause against (a) people ungodly, from man of deceit, and in justice deliver me, for You are Elohe my protection...*⁵

Jesus is the Man Who can purely cry out those words. You shall hear His pleas in the coming 14 days – in particular in the Garden and on the Cross. You may learn that the God delivered Him – into death for sinners. He removed His protection from Jesus

³ Hebrews 9:15.

⁴ Chrysostom, John. Reformation Heritage Bible Commentary. “Hebrews,” Stephen P. Mueller, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015, 115.

⁵ Psalm 43:1-2a.

that He might grant it to you, having won the right to do so on the cross, in His death. Now, when you have times of crying out to the Lord for your vindication, you have the words of the New Testament text to comfort you, those which today declare that

*the Promise of the eternal inheritance may have been received by the ones having been called.*⁶

The emphasis in that text is found in the placement of its words, that is, in “the Promise,” and “the eternal inheritance.” God’s promise was fulfilled by God the Son when He died to put into effect the eternal inheritance. Participation in such is for the “elect.” They are those whom God has called into His judgment of vindication. They did not search for His calling, He searches for them. They are you who have been summoned before the King Who died and now lives through the proclamation of His Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is this: death has come for redemption for you who have and continue to transgress the First Covenant. Jesus paid the price that God demands for sin, any sin and all sin. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Epistle Reading teaches of Christ the Crucified Who grants you true vindication through His death into the eternal inheritance which is His – the heavenly kingdom.

So also do actions, signs, symbols the changing and removal of the words which the Church confesses as one in her public religious services in response to God’s gifts teach. They are given to provide us with consistency and stability. For it is the words of the Lord’s public services to His people that believers in congregations like this begin to memorize in infancy and can still recite – often by song or chant – when our memories may fail as the end of our lives draw near. The rhythm of the words of God’s Services provide reminders of God’s conviction and God’s vindication when the sermons fall short.

To that end, veiling of the crosses, which may dated to the 11th century AD, is done

⁶ Hebrews 9:15c.

to show us how much we need Jesus' work on the cross. Such also is practiced among us to depict the reality behind these words:

But Jesus was hidden and went out from the Temple.⁷

The crosses which may be vaguely beheld under the colored fabric are given to remind us that Jesus was veiled and departed from the Temple on account of those who would have killed Him, but not for our sins. They saw Him as a blasphemer. He was never, in the revealed Mind and Will of God, intended to suffer death by stoning as a blasphemer. He had just called Himself by the Divine Name "I I Am," εγω ειμι, יהוה יְהוִה. Because those willing to stone Him could not behold Him for Who He is, Jesus was veiled and left the Temple.

Even so, Jesus, in using the Divine Name for Himself indicated that He was, and is, the God Who creates and sustains all life. He was appointed, before the foundation of the Creation was cast down, to die by hanging upon a tree. In that death He was to bear the Curse which Adam's Fall brought into Creation. He was accursed into death to remove the curse from Adam's descendants. Jesus, the Son of Adam and Son of God, ascended the cross to restore the faithful sons of Adam in every generation to blessed life eternal through the forgiveness of their sins.

You, dear Christian brother or sister, are this week, called to remember that it was the God of the Universe who ascended the cross to die for you. He hung there that you will not have to face the living God in your sins. He died to cover you in His blood, to declare you worthy of receiving God's promise of the internal inheritance. It should then not be a surprise when the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, in the Passion recounting which we heard today, proclaims Christ's cross in a veiled manner. For it is on the cross that,

the blood of Christ, Who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purif(ies) our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.⁸

⁷ John 8:59.

⁸ Hebrews 9:14.

God has again allowed this congregation to celebrate in repentance the Passiontide that has begun again among us. We are called anew to hear of Christ's work as the High Priest Who offered His own blood to pay the eternally enduring price to buy us, you, out from the burdens of sin, death, and hell. The Word of God declares of that:

But Christ appearing as High Priest of the coming good things, through the greater and more perfect tent (not handmade, that is, not of this creation), not through the blood of goats and calves but through His own blood, He went once-for-all into the Holy Places, securing eternal redemption.⁹

You will recall that, in the First Covenant, the High Priest was anointed to serve God by offering the blood sacrifices on the altar, first for his sins, and then for the sins of the people. The High Priest, and him alone, was to enter the Most Holy Place in the God-designed but human-built Tabernacle, and then the Temple, with the blood God established for the price of redemption. First, the High Priest sacrificed a goat for his sins and for those of his family. Second, the cleansed and redeemed High Priest offered the sacrifice of a female calf for the sins of the people of that Old Covenant.

Jesus, was the sacrifice and High Priest Who completed all that foretold. He was anointed to serve God by offering His blood sacrifice on the altar. He, and He alone who was without sin, entered the New Covenant Tabernacle in the heavenly places. There, in the Most Holy Place designed and constructed by God, Jesus entered with the ultimate Blood sacrifice God had established for the price of redemption for all people.

The benefits of that are veiled for you to receive again today. They are under God's Word from man's mouth. They come with the Word of God combined with water. They are delivered in, with, and under simple bread and wine to which the Word of God is added. Receive the gifts which grant you and sustain you into the inheritance of eternal life. In the sacrifice of the Great High Priest, your sins are forgiven!

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Lent V, *Judica* (LSB One-year series)

Introit Psalm 43:3ab (1 – 2a); Genesis 22:1-14; Hebrews 9:11-15; John 8:46-59; Psalm 43

⁹ Hebrews 9:11-12

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Soli Deo Gloria