

WE CONTINUE TO DESIRE TO BEHOLD THE JESUS

Hear again the emphasis contained in the Word of God for this 15th Thursday after Trinity:

These [Greeks] then came to Philip, the one from Bethsaida in Galilee, and they asked him, saying, "O sir, we continue to desire the Jesus to behold."¹

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

The annual theme of the seven weeks of Laurencetide is one in the Trinity Season that reflects upon God's work of sanctification in the followers of Jesus. This past Sunday, Vicar reinforced that holy living seasonal theme by calling our attention to the First Commandment and its meaning. His proclamation moved us to understand that God calls us away from anxiety and into trust in God above all things.

Yesterday, members of this congregation heard how Christian living without anxiousness, with trust in God, is His work in us. That is, we heard that God produces holy living in believers in Christ-crucified through His Spirit. It was proclaimed that the Holy Spirit, works in them, in you, through your hearing of God's Word. That then leads you, the faithful, to walk in line with the revealed will of the Lord.

That then is followed by Holy Cross Day, which we, in Christian freedom, have translated from Friday to Thursday this year. Also called, "The Exaltation of the Holy Cross," this celebration has been remembered in the Western Church since A.D. 629. The occasion for its commencement was the liberation from the Persians, by the Emperor Heraclius, of relics held to be those from the cross upon which Jesus had been crucified. They had taken them from Jerusalem some 15 years before that recovery.

In the Eastern Church, this feast, called the "World-wide Exaltation of the Holy and Life-giving Cross," is said to be one of the greatest of the year. They date the feast to the mid-4th century A.D. Its celebration was tied to the anniversary of the dedication of the Constantinian basilicas at Calvary and the Holy Sepulcher. It was first marked by the bishops attending the Council of Tyre in A.D. 335.

¹ John 12:21.

Rather than venerating some silver encased fragments of that which might or might not be the true cross, today we are venerating the Word of God. We do so by hearing His Word, beholding His Word, tasting His Word. We remember this day that the Incarnate Word was once hung upon a cross while bearing the sins of the whole world.

In the Propers of the day this began with the Psalm's declaration, through the words of David, of the Christ Who perfectly held God's Law in His heart. It proclaimed the Christ Who is the One Whose coming was foreshadowed in the writings of the scrolls of the Old Covenant. That was beheld through a verbal image of King David's entering the Temple to pay his vows. The Image of Christ on the Holy Cross continued with the proclamation of the image of the brazen serpent upon a stick. That had been given by God through Moses that God might heal those who looked to it in faith in God's promise.

The tie from that Old Covenant promise to its New Covenant fulfillment was made clear in the words of the Gradual. There we confessed in unison that God continues to tell that He has, "raise(d) [His] signal to the peoples." He did so, because, we said, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life." That, we understand, is beheld in the image of the Crucified One to whom the nations still look for salvation, justification and holification into eternal life.

From there, the Holy Spirit read into our ears the Word He inspired through the hand of St. Paul. He again declared the divine truth of the Holy Cross. That is, that "the Word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

Finally, the Evangelist John's God-breathed words, through translation, entered our ears. From there, as with the rest of the Word of God for the day, they penetrated into the center of our beings, our hearts. As the Spirit worked through those words in our hearts, our lips were opened to declare Christ's cross-work in the Second Article of the ancient Nicene Creed.

That good confession of the Faith is part of God's work of sanctification in us, in you. In making that public declaration of the truth of God's revelation of Himself, and His Church on earth and in the heavenly realms, that which has come from our lips now carries into our lives.

That leads us to understand that we, as one Body in this place, are here because *we continue to desire to behold the Jesus!*" (Jn. 12:21b). The emphasis in the text, as it is for this day, is that we, as a communion of believers have been given, by the continual hearing of God's Word, a desire, truly a will, to behold the One and Only Jesus of the Scripture.

In that desire we have a divine explanation of how Jesus wills to be beheld. That revelation began with the request of some Greeks, apparently proselytes, who had come up to Jerusalem to worship. They were surely aware of Jesus' earlier triumphal entrance into that once Holy City. They likely had heard the shouts of the crowds going before and following Him, their cries to Him as the prophesied Son of David, to "Hosanna! Save Now!" Some time following that is where the Gospel reading for Holy Cross Day begins, as it says (and we have kept close to the Greek word order in this translation on account of its textual emphasis):

And there were some Greeks out of the ones going up that they might have worshipped in the Feast; these, then, came to Philip, the one from Bethsaida in Galilee, and they asked him, saying, "O sir, we continue to desire the Jesus to behold."²

The narrative of the Holy Cross Day reading begins by telling of some Greeks who desired to behold the Jesus. Supporting details in the text tell its hearers that these were men who had come to Jerusalem to worship in the Feast, in whose days was the Jewish Great High Feast. Those men represent the fulfillment, recorded in the narrative just before our text, of the claim contained in the frustrated cry of those who were rejecting Jesus, *Behold, the whole cosmos after Him has followed* (John 12:19).

We hear that some Greek Gentiles approach Philip, a close disciple of Jesus. Philip is a Greek name. (Apparently his father or mother loved horses)! The Evangelist gives us

² John 12:20-21.

additional detail in declaring that Philip was from Bethsaida. That town lay about 90 miles as the crow flies north and east of Jerusalem. It was not very far from the town of Capernaum on the coast of the Sea of Galilee.

That means that Philip was from a predominantly Gentile (Greek) area of the Levant at that time in history. This indicates to us that which appears to be true much of the time in the Church today. That is that people, when they wish to behold Jesus, seem to be initially drawn to those who are most similar to them. It could very well be that those questioning Greeks were wondering if there was a place for them with the Jesus Who was before them. They did not want to behold any Jesus, but the Jesus!

Such details remain important for all the hearers of this day's Word from John's Gospel from that time forward. They situate this narrative in a real place, at a real time, with real people. That makes our text much more than a spiritual tale. It is real, earthy, and therefore, the day's scripture remains a valid witness to the Jesus it proclaims. Our text continues as the Greek's request to behold the Jesus travels to Him, as it says,

Philip comes and he speaks to Andrew; Andrew comes, also Philip, and they speak to the Jesus.³

Here we have a human handing on of the Greeks' request. It goes from Gentile-named disciple of Jesus to Jewish-named disciple of the same, and then together Jewish- and Gentile-named followers of Jesus carry the seeker's petition to Jesus. Their joint message carrying places them as equals in the Faith before the Lord of the Faith. To them, and thus through them, Jesus responds, as our text continues:

Then the Jesus answers to them saying, "It has come, the hour that He may be glorified, the Son of Man."⁴

Well, that is a "seeker friendly, missional answer" if ever we have heard one! The Greek Gentile worshippers have asked to behold Jesus. He certainly does not speak of Himself in the first person. He makes an enigmatic statement concerning the Messiah,

³ John 12:22.

⁴ John 20:23.

that is, the Son of Man. He answers them with a declaration that it is time for Messianic prophecy to be fulfilled!

We can imagine Andrew and Philip standing there, wondering what to report to those who have asked to behold Jesus. If they give them the words you just heard translated, how will they behold Jesus? Perhaps, as the two disciples were pondering what that statement meant, they were waiting for more. We don't know the timing of Jesus' answer.

In any event, Jesus was certainly obliging. He continues to declare what He means by explaining what His Words mean, namely, that the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified has come. Jesus' clarification of His meaning indicated to His faithful hearers by the Evangelist's use of his, "pay attention words." These St. John uses consistently in his Gospel whenever Jesus is teaching a basic truth of the Faith. It follows a form that some classroom instructors of those who have to take standardized tests still use as they tap their desk, stomp their feet, and say something like, "You really need to know this!" So, what were Philip and Andrew, and their Greek questioners to know? Jesus says,

αμεν, αμεν, λεγω υμιν (which a lot of the members of this congregation know means) *Truly, truly I say to all of you... "If not (a) kernel of the grain falling into the land may have died, it alone remains; but if it may have died, much fruit it continues to bear.*⁵

Oh my, Jesus is making a confessional statement, by using agricultural imagery. For us, this is again Second Article of the Creed stuff. That is to say, for those who wish to behold the Son of Man in His glory, they must behold Him dead, and being planted into the earth! There is our tie to the confession of the Psalmist, of Moses, of St. Paul for Holy Cross Day. That tie is that it is upon the cross that the Son of Man, the Messiah, Jesus the Christ confesses that He may be truly beheld by those who are the fruits of His Faith in the image of His Glory, that is, Him hanging lifeless upon the gory cross. That image summarizes the Atonment, Redemption and Ransom that Jesus gave on the cross.

⁵ John 12:24.

We know today, that which Philip, Andrew and those Greek seekers did not know that day long ago. That is, from the cross, His lifeless Body was placed into the ground. From there His re-vivified Body sprang to life on the third day. That verbal picture summarizes the justification before the Father that Jesus accomplished in His resurrection for those who remain confessing the Faith. From that, our text moves on to declare the lives of sanctification, of being declared holy and living holy lives to which you who have been bought with a price and justified are called to live, as Jesus says:

*The one continually loving his life in this cosmos will continue to destroy it, and the one continually hating his life in this cosmos into life eternal he will guard it.*⁶

That is why it seems that Holy Cross Day was placed into Laurencetide, in this sub-season of Trinity that emphasizes sanctification. It speaks of dying to life's sinful desires in this fallen world and living to life eternal as you follow Jesus. You Lutherans know how Dr. Luther phrases such biblical teaching, (Romans, though is his preferred text).

*The old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence.*⁷

Daily dying to sin and its desires, and rising to new life in Christ's purity are the fruits of the cross. Such produce the Holy Spirit works in you through your continual hearing of God's Word. From that Word you are freed to live in new life as God leads you to regularly behold images of Jesus in the hour of His glory.

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

Holy Cross Day, Trinity XV (LSB One-year series)

Psalm 30; Numbers 21:4-9; I Corinthians 1:18-25; John 12:20-33

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Soli Deo Gloria

⁶ John 12:25.

⁷ Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). *The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (p. 349). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.