

## ***Faithful Vision***

In the name of him who has reconciled us to God by his passion, death, and resurrection, dear friends in Christ: Not too long ago I saw an ad on television that began by showing a young fellow feverishly cooking a rather elaborate supper in the kitchen of what appeared to be his small apartment. Picture the scene: on the stove in the foreground is a wide pan filled with a thick bubbling tomato sauce. The man is at the counter beside and beyond the stove chopping vegetables on a cutting board with a great big chef's knife. He works with an intensity that suggests he's preparing a sumptuous meal designed to impress that someone special in his life – you know, show her that he's a twenty-first century Renaissance kind of guy. Anyway, once you've had a second to take this in, suddenly a cat jumps up on the counter, knocking something over into the pan on the stove. Hot red sauce splatters everywhere: on the cat, on the man, all over his white apron. It's a mess. At that moment, the camera angle changes 180 degrees. You see a pretty young woman standing in the doorway of the kitchen. She's just come in and there's this look of absolute horror on her face. The camera switches back so that you can see what she sees: the man is standing in front of the stove now holding the howling cat in one hand, the large Chef's knife in the other. Both are covered in the sauce that looks an awful lot like blood. Now, you know the whole story, so you realize that everything's perfectly innocent; but you understand that from she sees, this young woman believes that she's just discovered her romantic interest is either into torturing cats or cooking with them; and very likely both. You're left wondering, "How's he going to explain this?" It's really quite funny, in a sick sort of way; and for a person like me who hasn't got much use for cats, it works on several levels. Anyway, I honestly don't remember what the ad was trying to sell; but it did make the point perfectly: things are not always as they appear. Unless you know the whole story, it's very easy to draw the wrong conclusions about what you see.

Last week when we met for worship, we spent some time contemplating the desirability of being "heavenly minded". I said that it would be good for us to see and understand the present from the point of view of our heavenly goal. And what I mean is this: by faith in the Lord Jesus who paid the full price for all our sins we know for certain that one day we will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. And because of that, it makes sense for us to let *that* future shape our thinking and decision making in the present. When we set priorities and plan the use of our time and resources we can ask, "What *really* matters? What will matter in eternity? When I get to heaven, will I think that *this* (whatever it is) was important?" The idea is to avoid wasting needless time and effort on things doomed to pass away whenever possible, and to concentrate instead on the things that do matter: the people and the fruits of faith that we will value forever. It suggests a completely different way of looking at the world we live in. But like I said, that was last week's message.

Today, with St. Paul as our guide, we're going to take this concept of seeing the world differently even a step farther. Viewing the present with an eye toward the future is good; but it's only half the battle. The other thing we need to recognize is that even now, in the present, things are not always what they appear to be. Very often we think we understand what's going on; but we don't have the whole story, and so it turns out that our impressions are completely wrong.

Consider the world we live in. We look around and see that life goes on as normal. We measure success or failure by the standards of the world. Wealth, riches, fame, a good reputation, strong family ties, health, peace, pleasure, stability, tranquility, getting along with others, the art of compromise; these are good things. These are the things we seek. On the other hand, poverty, shame, humiliation, disgrace, sickness, disaster, pain, misery, suffering, family discord, emotional stress, conflict; these are bad. These things we hope to avoid. And we tie these things to our concept of justice. That is to say, those who do well, who work hard and who are diligent, they can expect to be rewarded with the good. And those who do evil or who are lazy and negligent can expect to suffer the consequences. They get the bad. And those of us who are religious bring God into this equation. We naturally assume that if everything is going well, then the Lord is blessing the situation, whatever it is; and if things are going poorly, then it would suggest that the Lord is showing his displeasure or is "allowing it to happen" as a way of bringing his hand of judgment on the situation. And we have to admit that that is pretty much the way we view the world.

But in this morning's Epistle reading, St. Paul says that is *not* our reality. He says, because Christ died for us all, we all died. So every one of us is – or at least *was* – dead. That's the way God sees the world; and since he sees it correctly in view of the whole story, that's the way it really is, even though it doesn't look that way to us. So everyone is dead; everyone who is not in Christ, that is. Those who trust in Jesus have been raised with him to new life – to eternal life. They will never die – regardless of what we see. So even when they look dead, when their bodies stop moving and we lower them into the ground, we can still say with absolute confidence that they're alive.

That is the way things *really* are. And because of this, St. Paul says, we no longer see anyone from the worldly point of view. He says, "We used to think about the Christ this way." He means that when he saw things from a worldly point of view, he, like all other Jewish people of his age, thought of the Christ as a leader for the nation of Israel. He would appear on the scene and be the great rewarder of the righteous and destroyer of the wicked. He would bring all the good things to God's people: peace, prosperity, fame, glory—all that stuff we count as positive. And he would bring death and destruction to God's enemies. Ah, but now he says he sees things accurately. Now that he knows *Jesus* as the Christ, he knows that his purpose in coming was not to reward the righteous. He couldn't. There weren't any. He came to be the Righteous One in our place. And he didn't come to destroy the wicked. If he had, there would've been no one left. No, he came to be destroyed as the wicked one in our place. This is Christ's mission of reconciliation to the lost world. He came to restore us to life and righteousness with respect to God. He came not to make the old creation better for us; but to usher in a completely new creation. Those who are by faith in Christ Jesus are already a part of this new creation, while those who are not in Christ are still part of the dead creation that's rotting away and well on it's way to being destroyed completely.

And this is why our whole usual way of seeing the world is so wrong. I mean, what good is all that stuff we think of as being good to someone who is really dead? What good are the acts of kindness or philanthropy however noble they may appear that are performed by someone who is dead? Let me give you a concrete example. A couple weeks ago, Warren Buffett, the second richest man in the world, announced that he was giving away the biggest single donation in history. He's giving some 30 billion dollars to alleviate hunger, disease, and suffering in the world. So now being hailed as a hero, and he's receiving all kinds of accolades and honors. What a guy, huh? Somehow I don't imagine that it's going to change his standard of living one iota. But I will admit that what he's done really does look good from a worldly point of view. Unfortunately, regarding his gift, Buffett is quoted in last Monday's *New York Times* as having said this: "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but *this* is a great way."

Now, I don't know about Mr. Buffett's religious convictions; but if he actually meant what he said (and I have no reason to believe otherwise), then it doesn't matter how noble and generous his actions appear. What we've really got here is a dead man doing a dead work. Both of them are a stink in the nostrils of God. Worse, because he holds up this "largest donation ever" as his ticket to heaven, it actually serves as an obstacle to him trusting in Christ the Lord who is the only way, truth, and life. Friends, we know the "largest donation ever given" to help the world with its problems: it was the Son of God nailed to a cross. And for anyone to think that they could somehow match that or even surpass it with any amount of money is as vile an insult and act of blasphemy to God as ever there could be.

And perhaps you're offended by my language. Maybe you're thinking, "Isn't he being a little hard on Mr. Buffett? Can't he find anything good to say about his generous gift?" Believe me; I too want to see it in a positive light. It appears on the surface good to me too. But the reason for that is that we are all being seduced by our sinful, self justifying flesh to see it from the old worldly point of view. If we could see it as God does, as it is really, then we would recoil in horror from it – just as we would recoil in horror from all the other good things we imagine that we do that somehow count to our credit before the Lord. Only what Christ did for us has any value when it comes to our standing before God; but then, having been reconciled to God through faith in Christ, even a donation of two tiny mites is counted by the Lord as worthy of praise – but it takes the eyes of faith to see it. In the eyes of the world, the widow's mites looked pretty pathetic; but to our Lord, who could see the faith in which they were given, it was a priceless gift of thanks.

Now, this is not to say that other good may not come of Mr. Buffett's attempt to reach heaven by standing on a mountain of cash. We know that God is able to work through even evil situations to accomplish great good. And again, the cross is the foremost example. The greatest crime in history, the torture and murder of God's only Son, becomes in the Lord's design the means to recreate the world and fill it with new life. God can and does bring good from evil. And so it is that Mr. Buffett's money may do good for others; but part of the problem here is that we have to redefine what's good. So let me state it just as clearly as I can: if something leads to faith in Christ Jesus – either initial faith in someone who doesn't believe now, or to deeper faith in someone who already believes – then it's good, regardless of how it bad it appears to the world. Likewise, if it leads to a decrease in trust in Jesus, or if it serves to continue the deception of unbelief, then it's bad no matter how good it appears to the world.

This morning's Gospel lesson is a case in point. The disciples of Jesus are caught in the midst of a furious storm on the Sea of Galilee. They are terrified and feel that death is imminent. They are struggling with all their might to keep their little ship afloat. They are in full blown panic. Now, I ask you, who wants to go through an experience like that? We'd all agree that it's terrible. And yet, the Lord uses this terrifying experience as the occasion to build up their faith and trust in him. So what is it really? Something good or bad? In the eyes of the world, bad; but when we see the situation as it really is, we understand that it's a very good thing. And with this in mind, what about the terrible experiences you've had or are perhaps enduring right now? What terrifying storms are you are facing? It's bad, isn't it? But let me ask, is Christ not with you in the midst of the storm? Of course he is. And do you suppose for a moment that he's worried that something awful is going to happen to you? Or is he resting calmly, knowing that all things are in his Father's loving hands, and because of that, nothing in this storm will prove to be to your ultimate harm? "Yes, but my situation is desperate! You have no idea what I'm going through, Pastor!" First, don't be too sure. I've faced a few storms in my time. And yes, I admit that I panicked too. And maybe it's because of that that I don't want to be the one who shakes the Lord and asks, "Lord, don't you care if we perish?" What kind of question is that? His very purpose in being here with us is to ensure that we never have to worry about that. He came to weather the biggest storm of all for us – the very maelstrom of hell – in order to give us life – the life that lasts forever. How can we imagine that he's not going to see us safely through the little squalls on the lakes of our lives?

But a word of warning is appropriate here. With all this talk of seeing things clearly, and as they really are, I don't want to create the impression that we will ever see things as God does. We will never have the whole story. Our minds and thoughts are far too limited for that. Only God sees and knows all. And so, just as we want to avoid seeing things from a worldly point of view, we also want to resist the temptation to imagine that we know what the Lord is up to, and how it is that he's accomplishing his purposes with the various storms and calms he sends into this world. That's the gist of today's Old Testament reading. Job, a man who lost his wealth, his children, and his health, knew a lot about the kinds of storms a person can face. And in the midst of his trial, he tried to understand what the Lord was up to. He had all kinds of speculations – which mostly turned out to be wrong. But in the end he stood shaking his fist at heaven and demanding an explanation. "Lord, why are you doing things the way you are? I don't understand!"

The text we heard is a small part of the Lord's answer to Job. And the sense of it is this: "Job, do you have any idea what you're talking about? Do you imagine that I need to take instructions from you? I'm the Creator, remember? Do you think that I owe you an explanation for what I do when you couldn't possibly understand the complexity and intricacies involved? I'm God, not you. I am a good and loving God, and I know what I'm doing. Your part is to trust me to do it."

Luther said it this way: "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who claims to see into the invisible things of God by seeing through earthly things (that is, events that happen and the works that people do); but [that person truly deserves to be called a theologian] who comprehends what is visible of God through suffering and the cross. There's a whole lot there to unpack; but for the time being, let me explain like this: Worldly religion, bad theology, sees things from the world's point of view – with its own system of determining what's good and bad. As a result, it is always led astray. It never sees things as they truly are. Real theology, correct theology, sees the cross of Christ Jesus as the ultimate and only good. Seeing that, there is no need to see anything else. Seeing the crucified Lord confirms God's super abounding love and his total commitment to reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ. And so we say our faith is in the cross of Jesus *and only in the cross of Jesus*, for that is how God is reconciling sinners and recreating them in

his image. Nothing else we see matters in a theological sense; not wealth or poverty, sickness or health, success or failure, apparently good works or bad—nothing. Only the cross. That is what it means to have faithful vision: in all of life's circumstances to keep our focus on the cross and what Jesus did for us there. May God grant to us such faithful vision now and always, and keeping us in this faith, may he use us as Christ's ambassadors to share the vision with others, that they too may be reconciled, and become in Jesus the righteousness of God. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***