

“You Turn Things Upside Down”

In the name of him who loved the Church and gave himself up for her, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel, we see the Lord Jesus denouncing the Pharisees as hypocrites and taking them to task for their man-made traditions by which they canceled the intent and meaning of the Word of God. Outwardly they were pious and upright, carefully following all of the commandments of God; but they were addicted to the letter rather than to the spirit of the law. And by their many man-made rules, they constructed a way to appear to be righteous while inwardly – in their hearts – they were doing the exact opposite of what God's law demands. They had turned things completely upside down.

It's the same thing the prophet Isaiah saw in the rulers, religious leaders, and people of his day, nearly 800 years earlier. And having just taken an excellent refresher course on Isaiah, I was tempted to give you a two hour lecture on the historical background of this particular Old Testament text. It's fascinating stuff. But God is merciful, and it's my job to represent him; so I'll give you the short version.

In the 8th century BC, the Lord raised up the Empire of Assyria to be his scourge to punish his people for their disobedience and idolatry. It came after many years of his prophets fruitlessly calling the Israelites to repent and return to the Lord. They refused. If anything, they only sank deeper into their depravity and rebellion against God. So the Lord was left with little choice than to follow through with the judgments he'd threatened. And so it was in 722 BC the Assyrian army came in force. They utterly destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, along with several surrounding nations like Syria and Lebanon, the latter of which was particularly devastated, even its famed cedar forests and lush fruit orchards laid waste. In the end, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel were carried off, either sold into slavery or scattered throughout the Empire. As far as history is concerned, they don't exist anymore.

The nation and tribe of Judah, in the south, was spared this destruction. It was part of the Lord's gracious plan to keep for himself a remnant of his people, and through then to fulfill the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the most important of which was to bring the Savior into the world through their line. But they were also supposed to have learned a couple lessons. First, that they could trust the Lord to protect them even against the overwhelming might of Assyria. And second, that they could expect the same kind of judgment to befall them if they, like their cousins to the north, continued to worship idols and rebel against the Lord.

Unfortunately they didn't learn these lessons. The people of Judah continued to worship the Lord as just one of many gods, and they kept engaging in all kinds of pagan practices and superstitions. So a few years later the Lord sent the Assyrians back with an even larger and more fearsome army. They destroyed many of the fortified cities of Judah and carried off thousands of captives. And then they turned their attention to the greatest prize of all: the city of Jerusalem. They laid siege to it, and began building the towers and war machines they would use to breach the walls. The situation was dire. We know the Assyrian force consisted of at least a quarter million men; while Jerusalem had fewer than 2000 able bodied soldiers to man its walls.

And that's when the Lord told Isaiah that there was nothing to worry about. Yes, he had brought his judgment against his people; but now he was going to act in mercy. He would spare the city of Jerusalem – which, as you might guess, had suddenly become very religious. Funny how people get serious about such things when the pressure is on, isn't it? They were offering sacrifices to the Lord right and left. And man, were they singing his praises – not because their hearts were in it; but because they were afraid and were trying to buy his favor. They were trying to impress him with their religious devotion by going through all the required motions. And because they weren't sure that would be enough, they were also trying to earn the favor of the other gods they worshipped. And just to be safe side and cover all the bases, the leaders were also trying to broker a deal with the Egyptians. It was hoped that for the right price, they could be persuaded to send an army to break the siege and rescue the city. In short, the people of Jerusalem were doing everything they could think of to try to save themselves.

The Lord told Isaiah to tell the people, “No. *I'm* going to take care of this. *I'm* going to save you—not because you deserve it, you don't; but because I am merciful and I want you to learn to trust me. You're going to wake up one morning very soon and that great big army out there that you are so afraid of is going to be gone. It will blow away like chaff in the wind.”

Isaiah delivered the message. And this is where this morning's reading picks up with the Lord's words about how the vision that Isaiah received is like a sealed book or a book given to someone who can't read. The idea is this: “You still don't get it, do you? I tell you until I'm blue in the face that I'm going to rescue you, and it's like I'm talking to a wall. The words just don't penetrate. My words of grace to you are like a sealed book and words you can't read.

“And why is that? It's because you really don't trust me. You draw near to me with your mouths, you honor me with your lips – that is, in your worship, you say all the right things – but your hearts are far from me. You don't trust me. And your fear of me – that is the reverential respect you owe me – is but a commandment taught by men.” The idea is that the people have asked for instructions. Going to the religious leaders they've asked, “What can we do to make the Lord smile on us? How can we earn his favor?” And they've been given a list of instructions that they're trying to follow. But again, it's so they can earn the Lord's favor by their own efforts to please him and thus ultimately rescue themselves rather than simply trusting the Lord to save them as he'd promised.

And the Lord sharply criticizes them for this. “You hide deep from the Lord your counsel. You ask, ‘Who sees us? Who knows us?’” That is to say, “You act like I don't know what you're really up to and what you're thinking. You've got it all backwards. You turn everything upside down. *I* am the Lord. *I'm* the one who saves. As it is, you are the clay pretending to be the potter, and the creature denying your Creator. Stop it. For behold, I'm about to do great wonders among you. And when I do, all your human wisdom and all your puny efforts to save yourselves will be shown for what they are: utterly worthless.”

And that's exactly what happened. Just as the Lord promised, one fine morning the city of Jerusalem awoke to discover that the Assyrian army had vanished. To be precise, during the night an angel of the Lord had passed through the enemy encampments leaving 185,000 of their soldiers dead. The rest fled in terror of this unseen killer. They made their way back to Assyria in ragged bands of refugees. The Lord saved his people. He did it without their help, and certainly without their having deserved it because they weren't trusting in him, they weren't really worshipping him, and they weren't obeying him. He saved them because of his great love and mercy. He saved them so that they would learn to trust in him.

And in this we see a close parallel to the time of Christ and the action in today's Gospel. Jesus is up against the Pharisees, who believe that they are earning the favor of God by their strict adherence to all their complicated rules. And mind you, they are dedicated to their worship of the Lord. They say the right prayers. They perform the proper rituals. They sing the right songs. And by doing all this, they believe that they are pleasing God and thus saving themselves. But they've got it all upside down. And when Jesus tells them so, they hate him for it. Ultimately they will kill him for it. And not coincidentally, it will be in yet another attempt to save themselves. Recall that the chief reason they decide to have Jesus killed is because they fear that the crowd will proclaim him king and the Romans will respond by crushing the Jewish state. They're afraid of losing their nation and their precious traditions. Better, they think, to have Jesus die so that the nation can live.

But through and despite their wrongheaded thinking and upside-down human reasoning, the Lord works the greatest miracle of salvation of all. When they think they are saving themselves from Rome by having Jesus killed, it is in fact God who is saving them from a far greater enemy: from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation. It's all the Lord's doing as Jesus dies on the cross for the sins of the world. It's all the Lord's salvation for his people – his people who do not deserve it, and who by killing Jesus are proving that they do not trust in him. And yet, through this, the Lord saves his people because he is loving and merciful. The Lord works his salvation so that his people will learn trust in him and the Savior he sent to die for their sins and to rise again that all who believe will also rise to new and eternal life in him.

And that includes us; which is why these texts inform our worship and our approach to the Lord even today. You see, like the Pharisees in the time of Christ, and like the people of Isaiah's day, we all have the inborn tendency to not trust in the Lord's unmerited grace and favor by which he saves. Instead, we imagine that we must somehow earn the Lord's favor and thus prove ourselves worthy of salvation. Or, to say it another way, we want to save ourselves. How? Through our good works, through our obedience to God's law, and through our religious devotion, which is shown primarily in our weekly worship. I mean, ask yourself, why do you attend Sunday services here? Don't you have to admit that there is a part of you that imagines it's because you owe the Lord something? That you are giving something that pleases him by your being here – be it your time and praise and worship or whatever? It's the price you pay for being a Christian. It's your contribution to your salvation. It's how you save yourself.

This is to miss the point entirely. It turns it all upside down. In truth, from the Lord's point of view, we are only here to receive. For here he gives you his Word by which your faith is created and sustained. Here he tells you what mighty things he has done to secure your salvation. Here he gives you forgiveness and life in Jesus the Son. Here he gives you the Son's body broken and his blood shed for you. And here he gives you his Holy Spirit to teach you to trust in him and to begin the transformation of your life. But it's so hard for us to see that. We want so very much to have some part to play in saving ourselves.

And by way of illustration here's a true story: some years ago after a funeral at which I preached (and no, it wasn't in this congregation) during the luncheon they held afterwards, I had the misfortune to be seated next to a fellow who obviously had some Pentecostal leanings. He kept telling me how much my message had moved him and how inspired by the Spirit it was. Even more, he wanted to impress me with his religious piety. He kept saying, "Oh, I jus' lo-o-ove the Lord Jeezus. All I want to do is pah-raise him all the time!" Quite frankly, I found him to be quite irritating; and I was looking for a way to politely escape. I thought I saw my chance when things were winding down and his wife came up and quietly suggested to him that it was time for them to be leaving (which it was). Apparently he didn't think so. He turned to her with a

vicious snarl and yelled (and I'll quote as much as I can), "God damn you, you blankety-blank, blank, blank. Can't you see I'm talking to the blankety-blank pastor?" And then, without missing a beat, he turns back to me with a beatific smile and continues to tell me how much he loves pah-raising Jeezus all the time.

Now I confess that his outburst left me speechless (not that I could have got a word in edgewise for all his talking anyway). But if I had been less stunned and quicker on my feet, I might have said something like, "You know, if you really love Jesus and want to praise him, then stop *just* telling him how much you love him and start treating your wife with love and respect." But the thing that gets me the most is how he couldn't even begin to see the disconnect between his words and his actions. It was a clear case of someone at least claiming to draw near to the Lord with his mouth and honoring him with the lips; but whose heart was far from him. But he couldn't see it.

And neither do we when we look at ourselves. It is the nature of sin to deceive. It's the nature of sin and mistrust and self idolatry to hide itself within us – to hide behind the appearance of faithfulness and goodness and fervent devotion to the Lord. And we can fool ourselves into thinking that we trust in the Lord when in truth we are turning things upside down and trusting in ourselves.

Today, through these texts, the Lord calls us to examine ourselves more thoroughly. He calls us to look deeper within to the things that are hidden in our hearts. He calls us to ask, "What am I really trusting in?" And then he calls us to repent. He calls us to turn things right side up again: to put him as Lord back up on top, and to look to him for all that is good; to look up to him for forgiveness, for life, and for salvation in Jesus his Son – who loved us and gave himself for us. He did it all. Therefore to him alone let us direct our trust, and be our thanks and praise forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!