

“Do You Now Believe?”

In the name of him who for us has overcome the world, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel we hear Jesus continuing the discourse with his disciples that we heard a portion of last week. It's late evening on what we call Maundy Thursday. The disciples are with Jesus in the upper room in Jerusalem. They've just finished celebrating the Passover together – the Passover meal in which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper: giving his followers the flesh of his breathing body and his very lifeblood under bread and wine for the strengthening of their faith and the forgiveness of their sins. In just a few hours, Jesus will be arrested, condemned, and crucified. He's all too aware of this. And yet, rather than think of himself and the horrific torments he would soon endure, he concerns himself with how what's about to happen will affect them. He knows they will be terrified, confused, lost, and broken hearted. They won't understand. And so he's trying to prepare them for the hour of trial they will soon face.

Last week we heard him explaining it to them gently in rather figurative terms. He told them that he was going away, that for a while they would not see him; and then again, after a little while, they would see him. He told them that the world would rejoice while they were filled with sorrow; but not to lose heart: their sorrow would be turned to joy. They didn't have any idea what he was talking about. They started mumbling to each other, “What's all this ‘we're not going to see him and then will see him’ stuff?” They wanted to ask him; but they didn't want to appear stupid – which is kind of ironic, because the several times in the past he told them point blank that he was going to Jerusalem to be arrested, condemned by the authorities, and killed, his words bounced right off of them. They didn't get it. That is to say, spiritually they were impenetrably dense and stupid. They did not and could not grasp the meaning of his plain words because they did not yet know or understand the true mission of the Christ: to offer himself on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So, Jesus has told them both in plain and figurative terms what will soon take place. And they are utterly clueless. You can almost feel his frustration. Finally, in today's lesson, he says (and I'm paraphrasing a bit), “Here, let me tell you in words that you will understand: I am going to my Father. I came from him, and now I'm going back to him.”

And at this the disciples really perk up. “Ohhh! Now we get it! Now you're speaking plainly. Why didn't you say it before? You've cleared everything up. No one need ask you any more questions. We've got it all figured out. And we know that you know all things. That's why we believe you came from the Father.” Jesus replies to them, “Really? *Do you now believe?*”

Jesus knows that they think they believe. He knows they have a few pieces of the puzzle. But he also knows that when their incomplete and shaky faith is put to the test – as it will be this night – it will fail them. He tells them, “I've got news for you: the hour is upon us when you will be scattered, each one to his own place, and you will leave me alone. Yet, I am not alone, the Father is with me. I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace. In the world, you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

These words of Jesus work on two levels. In the immediate context, Jesus speaks of his going to the cross. When he does, his terrified disciples will be scattered. They will all abandon him. And when he is dead, they will wonder what went wrong – how they could have been so deceived. They'll think, “We were so sure that he was promised Christ, the One sent by the Father. We truly believed. But that can't be right. The Father would never allow such a horrible thing to happen to one he loves. He would never allow his Christ to die, and most especially not die a shameful death on a cross.”

With the advantage of hindsight not available to the disciples, we know otherwise. We know that it was for this very task that the Father sent his Son into the world. It was the plan since the founding of the world: for the Son of God to offer himself, to go to the Father by way of the cross bearing the sins of the world, precisely so that we might have peace with God in him. The disciples came to know and understand all this only after the Lord's resurrection. Then Jesus opened their minds to take it all in. And he gave them his Holy Spirit to work in them true and holy faith so that they really could believe. In a sense, though they had spent three years in training with Jesus during his ministry, it was only after the resurrection that their instruction truly began. Only then could they put together all the things he had said and done in a way that was true and made sense. And only then could they apply what they now knew and believed about Jesus to their lives.

This they needed to do because of the larger context of Jesus' words. You see, Jesus was going to the Father again. At least, at his ascension, he would take from his disciples his visible presence. And again they would be scattered each to his own place. Not like before, when they had fled into the darkness at Jesus' arrest, and not to utter despair and unbelief; but due to persecution and due to their mission zeal to spread the saving message of the Gospel—that's what would scatter them. Before, only Jesus had faced the enemy. Now it was their turn. Now he was sending them into the world. And in the performance of their mission they would face threats, imprisonments, trials, public beatings, attacks by mobs, assassination attempts, and yes, death – death by sword, by fire, by stoning, and by the cross. And this is to say nothing of the other hardships they would face: lack of food, lack of clothing, lack of shelter, disease, burning heat and bitter cold, shipwreck, you name it. Jesus wasn't kidding when he told them "in this world you will have tribulation." And at every moment of every day the question of Jesus was being asked of them: "Do you *now* believe?"

When you face the tribulations the world throws at you, when you're being tempted by Satan, when you haven't got the basic necessities of life, when you're being threatened or persecuted for your faith in Jesus, when you're wasting away in prison falsely accused, when you're dealing with the mess and confusion created by false teachers in the church, when you're being tortured to death, do you now believe? Do you believe that in me you have perfect peace with God? Do you believe that I have overcome the world, and that in me, that is, through faith in me and what I've done for you, you too will overcome?

Well, do you? We know how the disciples answered the question. Oh, make no mistake, there were fits and starts. There were times of doubt. The one thing the disciples knew more than anything was how weak and pathetic their faith could be. And that's why they knew it was important to keep feeding it, to keep receiving the power of the Holy Spirit who comes through the properly taught and understood Word of God, and the Sacraments Christ has given his Church – his washing of regeneration and his own body and blood to sustain it. And they knew to pray – to pray directly to the Father in Jesus' name, knowing that for his sake the Father loves them, forgives them, and hears their prayers. They believed. And through faith they overcame. The question is: Do you now believe?

That's the question we will be putting to the five candidates for Confirmation this morning. On the day of their baptisms they were asked, do you believe? Do you believe in God the Father? Do you believe in God the Son? Do you believe in God the Holy Spirit? Do you believe in the teachings of the Christian faith? At the time they were unable to respond intelligibly. (Hopefully they'll do a bit better today. No,) then their parents and sponsors answered for them, confessing the faith that God the Holy Spirit worked in them by the water and the Word. But now they've matured (well, they've gotten older, anyway). They've been taught the basics. And they've proven to me that they have knowledge of the truth. But that

isn't the question. The question isn't what they know. The question of Jesus and of the church that bears his name is, "Do you now believe?" Today they will give witness to what they believe. And may the Lord give them the grace and strength to do so boldly.

The thing to see, however, is that it's not a question just for one day. It's a question Jesus will ask them the rest of their lives. And it's a question that they will answer with their words and with their actions, just as today, but without the benefit of the white robes and red stoles and the same level of encouragement and support from family and friends. The danger, of course, is for them to be like the disciples on the night of Jesus' arrest, who were so cocksure full of themselves. "Oh, yes Jesus, we know it all now. We've got it all figured out. And we truly believe!" They had no idea.

Far too many of our confirmands make this same mistake. The old joke about the Lutheran church that had an infestation of bats in the bell tower would be funny if it didn't ring so true. If you're not familiar with it, the story goes that the trustees tried everything they could think of to get rid of the bats, but nothing worked. Finally the old pastor said he knew how to get rid of them. He climbed into the bell tower and read them the Rite of Confirmation. They haven't been seen in the church since. Like I said, it would be funny if it weren't so true.

What does this confess about the faith of those who do this? The question of Jesus is not: Did you believe *then*? The question is always: Do you *now* believe? Do you believe that you are a weak and miserable sinner in constant need of God's forgiveness and grace? Do you believe that Christ Jesus our Lord comes to us in the Divine Service to give you his Word and his Holy Spirit, to strengthen your faith, and to equip you for works of service for his kingdom? Do you believe that in the Sacrament of Holy Communion Jesus he gives you his very body and blood? Do you believe what Jesus said, that in this world you will face tribulation; but that in him – by abiding in him and his truth – that you will have peace with God and with him overcome the world? Do you *now* believe? Even while the lips of those who allow themselves to remain scattered may say, "Oh, yes Jesus, I believe", their actions confess even louder and more clearly that they do not.

And look, Jesus' question "Do you now believe?" is not just for our confirmands. Multiple times every day he asks each one of us the same question. When you are tempted to sin or to ignore a neighbor in need, when you are facing a crisis of some kind and your faith is being tested, when you are tempted for no good reason to neglect worship, Bible study, or prayer thinking there's no real benefit to them, when you have an opportunity to share your faith in Christ with someone who needs to hear it and you're afraid to bear witness, in these and many other situations Jesus is asking you: Do you now believe? Do you believe that I have overcome the world for you? Do you believe that in me you have peace with God and salvation and eternal life? Do you believe that I am with you to the end of the age and that for my sake the Father loves you and he will never allow anything to truly hurt you in the long run? Are you confessing now, with your words and actions that you believe?

May God in his mercy give us the grace to understand that though we do believe, our faith is never as strong or complete as we'd like to think it is. May he give us the knowledge to know how little we know, that we may continue to seek with eagerness knowledge and wisdom from him. May he give us the grace to pray the prayer of the man who confessed to Jesus, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief. And may God our heavenly Father continue to feed us with Jesus his Son and give us his Holy Spirit that we may have his peace in this world so full of tribulation, and in the end overcome and receive the crown of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!