

Mirrors and Windows

In the name of who came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it for us; dear friends in Christ: You probably detected in our psalm and Scripture readings the main theme of the Epiphany season, that is, “the shining forth”: the idea is that the Light of Christ that first began to shine rather dimly at Christmas grows brighter and spreads out, going into all the world – today in particular in the teaching ministry of Jesus. As he opens his mouth to proclaim divine truths, his Words illumine the hearts and minds of his hearers. By listening to him the people sitting in darkness are brought into the light of Christ. And by now we’re used to this idea that Jesus himself is the Light of the world. No problem there. But strangely enough, in today’s Gospel, Jesus takes it a step further and says that *you* are the light of the world. And that’s a plural you. If he’d lived down south he’d have said y’all are the light of the world.

What does he mean by that? Just this: the world at large doesn’t see Christ. No one sees Jesus walking down the street and talking to people anymore. His ministry on earth in his visible body is done. But even though he can’t be seen, what the world can and does see are Christians – those who are filled with his teachings and who, consequently, believe and trust in him. So, when Jesus says you are the light of the world, what he means is that part of your calling as a disciple is to allow his light to be seen in you. As you do this, it’s important to bear in mind that you yourself are not the source of the light. That comes from the outside, from Jesus and his teaching; which means that you need to have a steady supply of his light coming to you for you to shine forth as brightly as you ought. Cut yourself off from Jesus, starve yourself of his Word, and you’ll go dark as a burned out bulb. Only by receiving his light can you shine in the darkness; and it happens in two ways.

The first is by reflection – the same way that the moon shines. You know, it’s nothing more than dark stone and dust; but at night the light it reflects from the sun makes it quite spectacular. That’s how we are to be with respect to our confession of faith – what we say about Jesus. We are to believe and confess only what we hear and read in the Holy Scriptures. And unlike the moon in this regard, which is full of craters and hills and has a surface that isn’t very polished, we are to be perfectly smooth mirrors, reflecting back the light we receive without distortion, without absorption, and without addition or subtraction. We are to believe, teach, and confess *everything* the Bible says and *only* what the Bible says.

And we need to reflect properly the Scriptures’ emphases. We can talk all day about what the Bible says about this or that topic, or about what Jesus said and did without getting to the main point of it all – which is the story of our salvation: how Jesus rescues us from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation by his cross and passion. This is what we hear Paul saying in today’s Epistle: “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Now, that doesn’t mean he didn’t teach the Christians and Corinth all kinds of other things that are necessary to know. It means that no matter what he taught from the Scriptures, he always kept the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ front and center. And so must we as we confess our Holy Christian faith like mirrors into the darkness of the world around us, reflecting back the light of Christ exactly as we receive it.

That’s our confession of faith – what we say about Jesus and his Word. The other way we are to shine forth with the light of Christ is by our actions. For if you believe the truth about Jesus and confess him as your Savior from sin, then he by his Holy Spirit dwells within you. And by his Word and Spirit he reshapes your thinking to lead and guide you to do the things that

God would have you do; namely, to love and serve your neighbors even as God loves and serves you. This is what Jesus means when he says, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” So in this regard we are to be like windows, letting the light of Christ that is within our hearts to be seen in what we do. Then when others see our actions, they will be looking at what God is doing through us – and they’ll give glory to him.

And here we want to distinguish between genuine Christian piety, a true window on the light of Christ within, and false piety, which is merely window dressing. For that we turn to today’s Old Testament lesson. Let me give you a little background here. The prophet Isaiah, like all of God’s prophets, was sent to call Israel to repent and return to the Lord for they had strayed from the paths of his truth and righteousness. Furthermore, the prophet foretold all kinds of horrible judgments that the Lord would send upon them if they failed to repent, primarily in the form of an enemy invasion. As was usually the case, the people completely ignored what the prophet had to say – that is, until they saw signs that the enemy was indeed gathering its forces to launch the threatened attack.

Then, driven by fear, it was time to get serious. They called for a fast of repentance. They dressed themselves in sackcloth and ashes. They went about with their heads lowered, looking glum and mournful. They thought, “If we show the Lord how sorry we are in such ways, he’ll back off. The judgment he threatened will go away.” But it didn’t. A powerful enemy army was heading their way and showing no sign of stopping. That’s what we hear them complaining about at the beginning of the passage. “Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no notice?” They’re saying, “Lord, here we are performing all the proper procedures, and you’re not paying attention.”

Speaking through Isaiah, the Lord responds, “Oh, I see what you’re doing all right. And what I see is that you’re just going through the motions. Outwardly you look like people who are repenting; but you’re not repenting. You’re only acting this way so that you can continue doing the very things for which I’m bringing you into judgment. You want to continue in your favorite sins and vices. You want to go on taking advantage of each other, oppressing your workers, and acting violently toward others. You’re not fooling me. If you think what you’re doing is a fast acceptable to the Lord, you’re only fooling yourself.”

And then he goes on to explain what true repentance looks like. It involves actually turning from sin and doing what’s right: loosening the bonds of your own wickedness and freeing the people you’re oppressing physically, psychologically, financially, or spiritually by failing to forgive them their sins. It’s sharing your food with the hungry, welcoming and taking in the homeless stranger, clothing the naked, and not hiding yourself from you own flesh. That last one requires a bit of explanation. The idea is that charity begins at home. The people you are most responsible for are the members of your own family; immediate family first, and then, in expanding circles, the members of your extended family. These people are your flesh and blood, so to speak. So, to hide yourself from your own flesh means to ignore them and their needs. When they come looking for help and are knocking on the door, you pretend like you’re not home. You avoid them, don’t return their calls, and pretend to be ignorant of their sad plight. “It’s their problem, not mine.” That isn’t the way the Lord sees it. He puts us in families precisely so that we will care for and support one another in time of need. And elsewhere in Scripture the Lord is emphatic about it. He considers the person who turns his back on his own family members to be worse than the most godless pagan.

Thus, through the prophet, the Lord calls his people to true repentance: an actual change of heart and not just an outward show of superficial sorrow. Do that, he says, and “your

light will break forth like the dawn and your healing shall spring up speedily.” Your light will shine – or rather, my light will shine through you – and I’ll turn back the disaster heading your way. It was a sure promise of rescue; but unfortunately one that the people of Israel were not willing to act upon. In the end they refused to repent and turn from their sinful ways. And so what little light they had left was snuffed out. The enemy came, destroyed their nation, and carried them off into captivity.

Let’s not make the same mistake. Let’s learn from their bad example not to merely go through the motions of repentance; but to actually mean it. You know what I’m talking about. Week after week we gather at the church and together we confess our sins. Depending on the service we’re using, there’s often a period of silence for each one to reflect upon their own individual guilt. Even when there’s not, there’s time before the service or when waiting to go to Communion for you to think about the real reason you’re here. It’s not to show God and the rest of the world what a good and faithful Christian you are. It’s not to tell the Lord how highly you think of him or to be seen by others praising him. It’s not to manipulate the Lord into doing favors for you because you went through the trouble of making it to church, endured the pastor’s long boring sermon, and sang a few hymns – so now he owes you something. No. We come for only one reason: to receive the forgiveness Jesus earned by his innocent suffering and death on the cross. That precious gift can only be received and prized when you acknowledge that you need it; when you confess, “These are my sins. This is the evil I’ve done and the good I failed to do. I hate it. I’m ashamed of myself. I don’t like the way I’m treating people. I want the Lord to change me so that I will do better. I want to walk as a child of the light of Christ.”

True repentance looks something like that. But how often do you find yourself confessing over and over again the exact same things because, truth be told, way down deep you have no desire to change? We love our pet sins and want to keep them. I’m guilty; how about you? And then we wonder why the light of Christ isn’t seen by the others around us; why they’re not looking at our good deeds and giving glory to God. The answer is obvious.

Friends, as Lutheran Christians we make pretty good mirrors. By God’s grace, our confession of faith is the cleanest, most biblical, and above all most Christ-and-him-crucified-centered expression of Christianity in the world today. And we do well to carefully learn, constantly relearn, and steadfastly adhere to it. We tend to fall short, however, when it comes to being windows, letting the light of Christ in our hearts to be seen in our actions. And the biggest reason for this is that our confession of sin is not sincere.

And with that in mind, I ask you now to search your conscience and identify in your heart a least one of those sins that you zealously guard and stubbornly cling to – that you confess on a regular basis without really repenting of. And don’t feel the need to be limited to just one; you can name more if you want to. Got it? Okay, now let’s ask the Holy Spirit to show you what the Lord thinks of this sin so that you can see it the way he does – how it hurts you and others, and how he hates it. Are you there? All right, now let’s ask the Lord to give you a proper sense of fear and shame that will bring about true repentance, so that you will want to let it go, leave it behind, and be free of it. If you’re with me, then say it: “I have sinned against the Lord. I repent and want to do better.”

Then hear the Good News: the Lord in his mercy sent his Son to die for you. By his cross and passion, he redeemed you. In view of your confession, as a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. May he give you the grace to be both a mirror of the light of his truth and window for the light of his love. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!