

A Sermon for Quinquagesima, February 18, 2007

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“Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.”

In the gospel (Luke 18:31f.) Jesus predicts his Passion. He tells the disciples that “the Son of Man will be mocked, ill treated, spat upon, scourged and killed.” Jesus also predicts his resurrection saying, “the third day he shall rise again.”

However, the disciples did not understand what he said. St. Luke writes, “They understood none of these things; and this saying was hid from them.” The disciples did not understand how the suffering, death and resurrection of the Messiah related to the salvation of Israel.

Their lack of understanding is followed by the giving of sight to the blind man. The blind man cannot see just as the disciples cannot see. The healing of the blind man points forward to the spiritual understanding Jesus will give to his disciples after the Resurrection.

If we fast forward in Luke’s gospel to the resurrection appearances of Jesus, we find the cure for the disciples’ blindness. In Luke 24:44, Jesus “opened their understanding that they might comprehend the Scriptures.” Then he said to them, “Thus it is written and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day.”

After Jesus cured their spiritual blindness, they understood the Old Testament prophecies in a new way. They saw that the sacrifice of Isaac, the Passover Lamb, the various offerings commanded in the Torah and numerous passages in the prophets pointed to the Cross.

Spiritual blindness is still the main issue in the conversion of hearts to faith. The church proclaims Christ crucified as the universal answer to the problem of sin. But many do not understand—“This saying is hid from them.” As 2 Corinthians says, “If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe” (4:3-4).

Because spiritual blindness keeps people from seeing the need for the Cross, and because spiritual blindness requires a miracle of healing, it follows that the enterprise of evangelism requires prayer that God will open eyes to see.

As we enter into the season of Lent, we should be aware that we have our own areas of spiritual blindness concerning the Cross. The Cross has implications for our lives that we are often unable or unwilling to see.

In the Morning Prayer lesson last Wednesday, Jesus said, “Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Our cross is the necessary pain that comes with the life of faith. Our cross is our struggle to resist temptation. Our cross is the labor we must expend to love when we do not feel like loving. Our cross is the death of temporal satisfactions that is necessary to point us towards the joys that are eternal.

We live in a world that runs from discomfort and pain and we are tempted to follow the way of the

world and run away also. Thus, we must constantly remind ourselves that the victory we have in Christ is not a freedom from struggle and pain but a freedom *through* struggle and pain. As 2 Corinthians says,

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair...struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body (4:7-10).

The epistle today (1 Corinthians 13:1f.) talks about love—the theological virtue of charity. St. Paul tells us that love suffers long, is not envious or proud, does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not rejoice in evil, but rejoices in the truth. In essence, love involves a kind of crucifixion; a death of contrary inclinations so that the love that comes from God will rule in our hearts.

We see the beauty of the cross: Christ's perfect and selfless gift of himself to God for us. We want to respond by offering ourselves, our souls and our bodies to God in worship and service. However, our worldly and fleshly attachments hinder our ability to love God and our neighbor as we ought.

Behold, we go up to Jerusalem. The Lenten journey to Jerusalem is a journey to Easter through the Cross. We go up to Jerusalem with the desire to grow in love for God and neighbor. The means of growth is prayer and fasting.

To fast is to deny ourselves the satisfaction of the appetite in order to direct our attention towards God, knowing that "Man shall not live by bread alone." Fasting produces hunger which is directed towards God through prayer. Fasting and prayer teach us the truth of John 6:35, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger. And he who believes in me will never thirst." The more we are detached from things and filled with Christ, the more free we are to love.

We do not go up to Jerusalem blindly, as the first disciples went. We go up with eyes open to see the necessity of the Cross and of our own participation in it. We go up with eyes open to see the glory and joy that lie on the other side of Good Friday. As 2 Corinthians says, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (4:17).

Behold, we go up to Jerusalem.