

Feast of St. Philip and St. James the Less
May 1, 2005

Rev. David A. Kind
University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

SHOW US THE FATHER

Malachi 3:16-18; Ephesians 2:19-22; John 14:1-14

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

It always seems to strike some people as strange that the Lutheran Church commemorates saints' days. Yet the Augsburg Confession reminds us in the twenty-first article: "Our churches teach that the remembrance of saints may be commended to us so that we imitate their faith and good works according to our calling." The saints are great examples to us, both of the grace of Christ, and of the life of faith. Today we remember two particular saints, St. Philip and St. James the Less, both of whom were apostles and numbered among Jesus' twelve disciples. If the remembrance of the saints is helpful to Christians, the remembrance of the apostles is even more so - not because they were better or holier people in themselves, but because of the office with which Christ entrusted them, and the work that He accomplished through them. St. Paul speaks of you as being "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets..." And so today we remember not just the faith and example of these two great saints, but especially give thanks for the testimonies of the apostles upon which our faith is built. For they testified of Christ by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and their testimony is the Word of Christ, upon which and upon whom our faith stands, as Paul says: "Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone..."

But the apostles we commemorate today did not write any of the books of the New Testament (though some associate James with the book of that title, which was more like written by another James who was the bishop of Jerusalem and not the apostle). In fact, we don't know much at all about either of these apostles, at least not from the Scriptures. James is said by the evangelists to be the son of Alphaeus and is listed as one of the twelve. Nothing else can be definitively stated about him. Philip is said to be from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. He is mentioned in all of the Gospels, but only St. John really tells us anything about him. He is responsible for having brought by his confession Nathanael to Jesus. He is mentioned at the feeding of the 5000 when Jesus tells him to get food to feed the multitude. He is again mentioned when several Greeks go to him in order to see Jesus. And He is mentioned in today's Gospel where He asks for Jesus to show the Father to the disciples.

There is not much from tradition about these two either. James the Less is usually confused with James the Just, the brother of Jesus and bishop of Jerusalem, so the two characters get intertwined and the real story of James the Less is lost. Often he is even pictured with a club instead of the saw, because James the Just was beaten to death by his persecutors. Philip is believed to have been married and to have had three or four daughters. It is claimed that he preached in Phrygia, an area also associated with St. Paul, and was martyred there as an old man by crucifixion. However, the same thing is claimed about Philip the deacon of Acts, and apparently again there is a confusion over just which Philip this story is really about. But perhaps this lack of information

about these apostles is all for the better. After all, their importance is not to be found in their own stories, but in their witness to Christ.

Again today we witness a portion of Jesus' conversation with Philip and James and the rest of the eleven in the upper room on Maundy Thursday. And once again the topic is Jesus' departure. Just prior to the lesson, toward the end of John 13, Jesus says to the eleven: "Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come,' so now I say to you" to which Simon Peter responds: "Lord, where are you going?" and when Jesus says that they will follow Him later, Peter says: "Lord, why can I not follow You now?"

It is in response both to Peter's questions and to the fear He Himself aroused when He predicts that Peter will betray Him, that He says: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." In this consoling statement, we glimpse both the ultimate will of God toward us, and the manner in which that will is accomplished.

In very simple terms, the will of God is to bring us into heaven. He desires to restore to us the fellowship with Himself that mankind lost in the Garden through sin and because of sin has never been able to regain. Man was made for fellowship with God, that God might have someone outside of Himself upon whom to bestow His love. But man, as you well know from Genesis, rejected the love of God in exchange for another path to divinity, the path of willfulness against God and striving to attain the blessings of heaven in a way that God had not given, through the eating of the forbidden fruit. God's will is to repair and eliminate the separation that resulted from that rebellion, and to bring each one of us back into fellowship with Him in give us heaven.

The way His will is accomplished toward us is through Christ Jesus. Our Lord becomes one of us in order to bridge the separation between the creator and His rebellious creatures. He, though Himself fully obedient, takes our disobedience and rebellion on Himself and suffers the curse it deserves, forsakenness by God, suffering, and gruesome, torturous death by crucifixion. This sacrifice of our Lord pays the way for us. But the way must also be opened. And so our Lord rises victorious over the curse, over sin, over death and the devil. And He ascends bodily into heaven. In Him humanity is reconciled to God and regains fellowship with the Father. A Man thus opens to us the way of eternal life, and a Man now sits at the right hand of God the Father, that we, and all mankind might follow. He not only pays the way, but opens it for us, and is Himself the Way.

And so He tells the eleven: "And where I go you know, and the way you know." That is quite a statement. For that is a topic with which mankind has struggled for millennia! How to get to heaven? Entire philosophical and religious systems have sprung in the attempt by man to find the



path back into God's presence, the path to gaining the blessings of heaven. And now Jesus says to the disciples "you know the way". And the disciples, understandably, are confused.

Thomas says in reply: "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" And if they were supposed to have discovered the way on their own, Thomas would have been right. For all human endeavors to reach up into heaven fail. But Thomas was not listening carefully. For Jesus had just said that it would not be up to them to find heaven on their own, but that He would return and bring them there. And so He says to them: "'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" You cannot do this Thomas. I must do it for you. I am the Way. I am the truth, and no other. I am the life, a life that you cannot gain for yourself, but that I give to you. Look no further than me. I am at the center of the whole thing.

He goes on to say: "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him." Knowledge of the Father is found in knowing Jesus. In Him you come to see and to know the Father. And Philip, whom we are commemorating today, says to Him: "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." OK Jesus, if you say that we know and have seen Him, then just show Him to us, and we'll be content. But Philip's response misses the point entirely. One does not get around Jesus to find the Father. Jesus is not just a means to an end, that is used and then set aside. One can only see the Father in the person of Jesus. And our Lord responds: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me?"

Philip's response is one that many people have today. People always seem to want to get around Jesus, either moving past Him, or ignoring Him altogether. So many Christians treat Jesus as just a means God uses to erase sin. But then, sins having been dealt with, Jesus is pushed aside in favor of experiencing the Father's holiness directly for some, or experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit for others. They treat Jesus as if He has done His work and now has faded into the background; as if there is something better if they can just get past Him and onto the next thing.

And then there are those who believe that one get to the Father and into heaven without having to deal with Jesus at all. Jesus has paid for the sins of the whole world, the argument goes, so others who have not heard of or who have not believed on Jesus must have access to God the Father too now. Rome holds to the idea of the noble pagan who through his or her apparent goodness merits the grace of Christ, though Christ is unknown or not believed. So one can get to heaven by being a good Jew or Muslim, the opinion goes, for all believe in the same Father as God.

And others like to hold the door open even farther, believing that any religious system, if followed faithfully, can be a path to spiritual enlightenment and can gain one entrance into heaven. And it is not just the Unitarians, or universalists, or new agers that think this, but many Christians who do not want to believe that their friends, relatives, or acquaintances who are unbelievers will end up in Hell. And yet the Lord says in Malachi that we must draw a distinction between the righteous and the wicked, and the distinction is not made by judging outward works, but by judging faith, which one "serves God" and which one "does not serve Him".

Jesus answers both to Thomas and to Philip destroy all of these false ideas and vain hopes. For He says to Thomas: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through

Me.” And He says to Philip: “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me.” There is no path to fellowship with God except by Jesus. And this has not just to do with the fact that only Jesus forgives sins. For Jesus has indeed forgiven the sins of the whole world. This has to do with who the true God actually is. You see, you cannot know God or approach Him in any way, unless you know and believe on Christ; for God the Father is in Christ, and Christ in Him. They are different persons, but share in one divine essence and are, with the Holy Spirit, One God. A denial of the Son is a denial of the Father. Ignorance of the Son is ignorance also of the Father. How can one discover and come to know God when one is actively rejecting Him and refusing to know Him as He actually is? How can one gain entrance to heaven, the kingdom of God, when one claims that another sort of God rules there? It is impossible and idolatrous and, indeed, damnable. No one, NO ONE, comes to the Father but by Jesus.

Moreover, one never gets past Jesus and onto something else or something better. The Father is found in Jesus and Jesus in the Father. One cannot set the Son aside and experience God in a more direct way. Jesus is the direct way. Philip could not get any better glimpse of God than by looking at Jesus. He could not get any closer to God than He was at that very moment. Jesus is it! In Him we have the fullness of God, and apart from Him we have nothing of God.

Moreover, the Father, Jesus says, is “glorified in the Son”. It is only in Jesus that we see God as He truly is. Only in Christ do we know His good will for us, that will to restore us to fellowship with Him and to innocence in His presence. But more importantly, only in Jesus do we see the greatness of His love for us, love that leads a Father to put His own Son, a Son who shares His very being, to death as a saving sacrifice.

Now, through the proclamation of the Gospel, Jesus says to us: “Where I [have gone] you know, and the way you know.” In Christ, through the apostolic Word, we know the way and how to follow. We find the Way in Christ, who is Truth, whose Word is truth, who gives us life and promises us heaven. And we follow by believing on Him and living in His grace, receiving His gifts. We follow by baptism where we die with Him and rise to new life. We follow by His Word which proclaims Him and strengthens our faith in Him, in which we hear His voice. And we follow Him by dining with and on Him in Holy Communion where He gives us heavenly food to bring us through this world, keeping us safely in the way which is Himself. And at last He will, as He has promised, come again and receive us to Himself. He will bring us where He has gone, to His Father’s house where Philip and James and all the saints now dwell, and where there are rooms prepared for us. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, to life everlasting.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧