

The Confession of St. Peter
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✧ Jesu juva ✧

THE RIGHT CONFESSION OF CHRIST

Acts 4:8-13; II Peter 1:1-15; Mark 8:27-35

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

When Jesus asks the disciples who people said that He was, He was asking about their confession of Him. It was more than a question of naming Him. It was a question about what they believed concerning Him? If He were John the Baptist, or Elijah or another one of the prophets as many people thought, He could do nothing to save them. And their faith in Him as a prophet was a faith that still looked for something else, something more than what they thought He was. It was an incomplete faith in the sense that it lacked the revelation of its ultimate object. Prophets are important figures to be sure; nevertheless one who is but a prophet always points forward to something or someone else which is the fulfillment of prophecy.

When Peter says that Jesus is the Christ, He rightly says that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the prophetic hopes voiced through the ages. He recognizes that Jesus is not merely another in a long line, but the end and culmination of that line. In the Man walking along the road with him was the pinnacle and fullness of God's revelation to men and activity among men. They need look no further. Here was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. The answer Peter gave to Jesus question was the right answer.

At once, St. Mark tells us, Jesus: "began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ. But who Jesus is was only the first question that needed to be answered. The other, unspoken question is: what does this mean that He is the Christ. And this tacit question Jesus Himself answers. Being the Christ means that He will sacrifice Himself for their sake. He will suffer greatly, as Isaiah the prophet revealed long before. He will be rejected by the leaders of the religious establishment and by all the people too. And He will be murdered by them. Yes, being the Christ meant taking up the horrible, torturous, deadly cross, the wood of which would be stained red with His holy and precious blood. But that would not be the end. After the cross would come the resurrection; and these two things together would bring about the salvation of the world. This is what being the Christ really meant.

Peter did not like it one bit. Mark says: "Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him." Now why does Peter rebuke Jesus concerning these things? He does so because this is not what He believed about the Christ. This was not what He meant when He said Jesus was the Christ. It is neither what He was looking for nor what He wanted, for Jesus or for himself. He had seen great things with Jesus: the feedings of the 5000 and of the 4000, the healing of the sick, the casting out of demons, the restoration of the hearing and speech, sight, and mobility to the disabled, Jesus walking on water (and himself doing so with him for a few moments too!). He'd even seen a dead girl raised to life again. Was cross and suffering and death where all of these glories of Christ were leading?

And what of the wisdom that he'd heard from Jesus' lips? The preaching against false piety and legalism, the teaching of mercy and of love, the promises of the Kingdom of God and of its inevitable growth and success, the power of the Word of God – would the lips that spoke these great things also be forced to cry out in agony and then finally be silenced by the hatred of the scribes and priests and elders of the people?

No, this is certainly not what Peter wanted for Jesus. And it is certainly not what He wanted to become of Jesus great work, of which he was now a part. And it most certainly was not what he wanted for himself, for who would wish to follow a man doomed to suffer and die? We are not told the details of what Peter wanted, but we can imagine that it was something quite different than that. What Peter wanted was glory for Christ. And in Christ's glory, he himself would bask and would, to a certain extent, share. This is what Peter believed concerning the Christ. Peter's, at this point in time, was what we might call a theology of glory, a belief about Christ that resulted in worldly glories and successes and in outward visible victories for the faithful under His leadership. And so Peter rebukes Jesus over this talk of suffering and death.

Look at what Jesus does. He rebukes Peter in the strongest possible way, and just before saying it, He turns his back to him. Look at that! "But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, "Get behind Me, Satan!" He turns away from Peter and looks at His disciples, in effect saying to Peter, you were correct in saying that I am the Christ, but in this false confession you hold about what it means for me to be the Christ, you are no longer my disciple, but have become as the devil himself is in your rebellion. "For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."

Being Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, did not mean what Peter and others thought that it should mean. It would not be about worldly dominion and acclamations. It would not be about easily won outward successes and glories. It would not be about position and power in this world. These are the things of men, not of God.

Rather being Christ involved exactly what Jesus had been telling them about. It would be about suffering many things, about being rejected by this world and her leaders, and it would be about dying and rising. And why are these, for the most part, humiliating and ignoble, things called the things of God? These are the things of God because through these things the love of God would be bestowed upon all people. Through these things, God was reconciling the sinful and condemned world to Himself again. Through these things He was paying for the sins and taking the condemnation on Himself, in order to free all people from them. In this fulfilling of the Father's will, Christ was giving more love than this world has ever known, and certainly more than it ever deserved, for here is the selfless sacrifice that defines what love is to be. And herein is our salvation. And here, though hidden under suffering and death, is the real glory of God.

Jesus goes on to give instructions to the disciples about how their lives are to be about confessing Him properly. "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." Confessing Christ properly involves more than just recognizing and acknowledging who He is. It also means fully believing and confessing what being the Christ means. And here we are called to deny ourselves first of all in the realm of our own thoughts about how Christ and His kingdom ought to be and how God ought to have ordered things differently than He has. Our natural inclination is to put the cross and suffering of Christ behind us and focus on that which

appears a little more glorious. Let's look only at the risen and ascended Christ. Let's make His reign at God's right hand the center of our theology and faith. We can't rebuke Christ for having suffered as it's already done, after all. But let's get past all of that, says the theologian of glory. And let's count on some worldly successes for Christ's Church and for ourselves as well. And Jesus would again say, Get behind me Satan! For these are not the thoughts of God, but of man.

Yes, Christ now lives and reigns at God's right hand, but let us never forget that He appears in Heaven as a lamb that has been slain! Though the suffering and death on the cross are completed, they remain the centerpiece of the Christian faith and of Christ's heavenly glory. And we never move beyond Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection in order to get on toward something better or more glorious. The grace and mercy of God obtained for us on the cross, Christ's love poured out there, is the source of our faith and of our continued life in the faith, the fruits of that sacrifice empowering every gift Christ bestows upon us from our new birth in Baptism all the way to the resurrection of our flesh on the last day. This is why St. Paul says of the sacrament of Holy Communion, not here is a glorious feast for you (though it certainly is that), but rather He says: "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." Faith never moves away from Jesus suffering, death and resurrection.

And the faithful will confess that not only in the way they talk about Jesus and about what it means to be a Christian, but also in the way we try to live our lives. Our lives become confessions of Jesus and of His Gospel in the self denying and sacrifice of love that gets its shape from His own self-sacrificing love. St. Peter himself writes: "But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." Now doing this may seem inglorious in terms of the outward and worldly appearance of things. It will probably involve suffering of some sort. It will certainly involve self-sacrifice in terms of will and pride and action, even if not of bodily security and welfare.

And such a life, a life that confesses Christ faithfully both in verbal confession and in lived confession, may seem to be a loss of life when viewed according to this world's way of judging a successful and fulfilling life; but we must not judge according to this world's standards, but rather according to Christ's. Our hope, after all, is not in this world, but in Christ and in His kingdom, in those "exceedingly great and precious promises" of which St. Peter speaks. Again our Lord says: "whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it."

It took a bit of time for Peter to come around to a right confession, even after Jesus' rebuke. We see Him resisting the truth about Christ even as Jesus was suffering the very things about which He had spoken to His disciples. And as Jesus was suffering Peter disassociates himself from Him and denies Him three times. But Peter repented and was restored by Christ. He came at last to the right confession of what it meant for Jesus to be the Christ, so that, concerning a miraculous healing which he had done, we see him boldly speak to the same people who had just recently put Jesus to death: "by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Yes, Peter, though once rebuked as a devil, confessed Christ rightly and faithfully; and did so to his death.

And now we are called to do the same. But we are not left to our devices to accomplish this. Peter also writes to give us the same hope that he himself had, saying: “to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.” The right confession cannot come from us of ourselves. It must come from Christ and be given to us and maintained in us by His grace. But as Peter says, everything that pertains to that right confession, both in life and in godliness is His good gift to us. And so we must abide in the grace and peace of Christ the crucified and in His Word; and then we, like Peter will also faithfully confess Him who is the Christ, our Savior and our Lord, to whom belongs all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠