

Quinquagesima
February 3, 2008

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

✧ Jesu juva ✧

FAITH OF CHRIST, FAITH IN CHRIST

Luke 18:31-43; I Corinthians 13:1-13; Isaiah 35:3-7

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

Today we have set before us two powerful examples of faith and faithfulness, the first in Jesus Himself, the second in the blind man. We encounter our Lord toward the end of His earthly ministry just outside of the city of Jericho. As He explains to His disciples, He is on His way to Jerusalem where He will suffer and be crucified. And He knows it. More than that, He talks about it with His disciples, saying to them: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished. For He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. And they will scourge Him and put Him to death. And the third day He will rise again."

What kind of man, knowing all this, would proceed to Jerusalem? A man of the greatest faithfulness and of the greatest faith. Jesus not only goes to Jerusalem, He goes there deliberately with great determination. Nothing will stop Him from going to Jerusalem, for this is what He must do. His whole life as a man has been leading to this city and to this end. He was sent by God the Father for this purpose, and as Jesus said to the Jews in John 6 (:38): "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." And that will was not just that He should walk about imparting wisdom as some sort of misunderstood sage, as so many today think of Him; but that He who is the Son of God and the Son of Mary, the joining of human and divine in one Person, would suffer and die to reconcile man to God. And so he said to the Jews in John 8: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (John 8:28-29). Notice what He is saying here: When He crucified, then it will be proven that He does the will of God the Father.

But what cost this doing of the Father's will! "He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. And they will scourge Him and put Him to death..." Jesus knew exactly what He would suffer and how great that suffering would be! And still He goes forward to Jerusalem, such is His faithfulness to God the Father and to that which the Father had said to Him. Our hymn today captures the intent of that speaking:

"He spoke to His beloved Son:
'Tis time to have compassion.
Then go, bright Jewel of My crown,
And bring to man salvation;
From sin and sorrow set him free.
Slay bitter death for him that he
May live with Thee forever."

And the cost Jesus knew also: “The foe shall shed my precious blood, Me of My life bereaving.” And still He goes, for He is not only faithful to God, but has faith in His Father. He knows that the Father, as the Psalmist David prophesied: “My flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. You will show me the path of life...” And so Jesus also says to His disciples: “And the third day He will rise again.” He will suffer and die to be sure, but according to the will of God the Father, and by His own Divine power, He will rise again to life, and thereby will conquer sin and death and the devil, all mankind’s greatest enemies. But what faith it took to move forward to Jerusalem and actually do it!

Yes, in Jesus we see the fullness of what St. Paul encourages in us: faith, hope and love. Faith in trusting the Father and going to Jerusalem, hope in looking forward past the immanent suffering toward the resurrection from the dead, and love throughout in that He suffers all this for our good, for our salvation.

On the way, however, He takes time to bestow love and salvation on one particular man, a fellow named Bartimaeus, who was blind and cries out to Him for mercy. Here at once Jesus gives the disciples, who did not quite understand what He was about even at this late date, an example of His love and purpose. For He is willing, despite their objections to be pestered by this poor man, to exercise His power on His behalf, and to take away His infirmity. The disciples, of course, warn Bartimaeus to be quiet and leave Jesus alone. But Bartimaeus won’t be quiet. He cries out all the more for Jesus to have mercy on him. And Jesus, of course, does not mind being bothered by Bartimaeus – He will be bothered by much greater pains than this small disturbance very shortly! And so He stops and calls the blind man to Himself and asks him: “What do you want Me to do for you?” And when Bartimaeus asks that he may be made to see, Jesus heals him, saying: “Receive your sight; your faith has saved you.”

And what great faith we see not only in Jesus, but also in this poor blind beggar who has such great faith in Jesus! Luther points out ten ways that Bartimaeus’ faith is shown in this Gospel lesson. First, Bartimaeus has evidently heard of Christ before and believes Him to be the Savior; for when they tell Him that Jesus is passing by, He cries out at once for Jesus to help Him. In this we see faith, for as St. Paul says, “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” Bartimaeus had heard, and He believed.

Second, Bartimaeus believes Christ will help Him. He does not doubt that Jesus will heal Him, but trusts fully in Jesus’ kindness and love. Third, He calls on Jesus and prays to Him. Paul says, “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed?” Again this is evidence that Bartimaeus believed on Jesus.

Fourth, the beggar confesses Christ. He calls Him “Son of David”, a royal and Messianic title. Bartimaeus knew Jesus to be the promised Messiah and trusted in Him. And as Paul says, “no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.”

Fifth, Bartimaeus struggles against the world to cling to Christ. Those following Jesus told Him to leave Jesus alone, to be quiet and go back to his begging. They imply here that poor Bartmaeus is not worthy of Christ’s attention and blessing. And perhaps the man’s conscience told him the same thing. But Jesus is His only hope, and so he trusts in Christ rather than listen to the world or his own conscience. He struggles against them and refuses to be silenced so that He may reach Jesus. And this too is exactly what faith must do when assaulted by the accusations of world and devil and conscience. Faith must fight against them and seek Christ despite its own unworthiness.

Sixth, Bartimaeus stands firm in this fight, ignoring the cries of those trying to stop Him. Luther says here: "So it goes with all who hold firmly only to the Word of God, close their eyes and ears against the devil, the world and themselves, and act just as if they and God were the only ones in heaven and on earth."

Seventh, Bartimaeus, having been healed follows Christ. Eighth, he glorifies God, thanking God for the healing he has received, and telling others about it that they too may learn of Christ and put their trust in Him. Ninth, he becomes a reason for others to praise God, an example of Christ's love and mercy. And tenth and finally, that by faith, the poor blind beggar Bartimaeus is made pleasing to Christ and to God, for Jesus praises his faith. And this is the only way that anyone is found pleasing to God, by faith in Christ Jesus.

For we all are like Bartimaeus in our natural state. We are impoverished, unable to do any worthwhile works before God, and we are blind spiritually, constantly stumbling around choosing the wrong things, walking the wrong paths, desiring what is harmful instead of what is salutary, perhaps not even realizing that we are blind, never having had sight before. And so before God we are nothing but beggars, and no one can help us.

But then Christ comes to us through His holy Gospel and begins to enlighten our darkness by the power of it. As Isaiah said, by the Gospel of Christ: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped." And Jesus says to us: "Be strong, do not fear! Behold, I have come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; I have come and have saved you." I have taken away your sins, covered your shame, and have suffered and conquered your death. And by receiving this Gospel, we like Bartimaeus are brought to faith.

We stand now on the front stoop before the doorway of the Lenten season, when we commemoratively and ceremonially will also travel with Jesus to Jerusalem, to witness through the Holy Gospel His sufferings, His death, and His resurrection. Let us seek Him faithfully, follow Him faithfully, and cling to Him by faith, trusting in His Word. As you perhaps spend a little more time in penitence considering the weight of your sins, let not the voice of your conscience or of anyone else keep you from Christ, but stand firm in the faith, crying out to Him: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." For this is what He in His great faithfulness and love came to do, that you might, like Bartimaeus might by faith in Him be lifted out of your blindness and poverty, to dwell with Him and to begin at last to see. And that which He has spoken and promised to you He will also certainly do; for Christ Jesus, who was so faithful as to suffer and die for us, is always faithful to His Word, to whom be all honor and glory now and forever. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧