

We enter this Sunday into the most holy time of the year. Today is called Passion Sunday, for in our worship we begin to read about more intensely and to meditate upon the passion of Jesus Christ. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, and we will re-enact the steps of Jesus as He and His followers process into Jerusalem for the last week before His passion. Next Sunday, we read the Passion narrative as we enter into Holy Week, our last week of fasting in preparation for the already, but not quite yet, celebrations of the Resurrection. The schedule of services is intense, but they are an important part of marking the intensity of the sufferings of Christ. I encourage you to participate, follow Christ in His passion, and be resurrected with Him on Easter. May God grant us a Holy Passiontide.

Now today's collect begins, "We beseech thee, Almighty God, mercifully to look upon thy people." This is reminiscent of the scene from the cross in St. John 19:26 and 27, where our Lord Jesus Christ looks down upon His mother Mary says, "Woman, behold thy son." Then again from the cross, hanging and slowly suffocating, He turns to the beloved disciple, St. John, and likewise he says, "Behold, Thy mother." Here in His most bitter pain and sorrow, as Christ pours Himself out for the world, He looks down upon His people desiring that they should be united in love, that they should truly care for each other. He here gives of Himself completely, withholding nothing for Himself, so that His followers would understand what they were called to. In our natural fallen state, in our times of self-centeredness, we cannot lay down our lives as Christ did; but we prayed this morning that we would be governed through His Spirit, not through our wills, and therefore preserved, yes, in this life, but also most especially in the life of the world to come—preserved for evermore.

Who is this man, crucified most horribly; betrayed by all, save for those few of His family and followers brave enough to linger at His feet? This is the question posed to every person since Jesus Christ's incarnation. And this question is at the core of today's Gospel reading which relates to us the last part of a dialog between Jesus and a group identified in the gospel simply as "The Jews." Earlier in this chapter, we read that Christ's words struck the hearts of many of the people listening to Jesus, and faith welled up in their hearts; but there was a persistent majority who had their mind set that Jesus was simply a troublemaker, threatening the status quo, and therefore He had to be stopped. At the heart of this debate is the fact that these Jews simply refused to believe in the testimony that Christ offered of Himself, and they refused to accept the testimony of the miracles of Jesus. Over and over again, Christ asserts that He is from God the Father, that He always listens to God and does what God prompts Him to do and says what God prompts Him to say. He and the Father are one, and therefore to deny Christ and His testimony about Himself is to deny God.

Of course the Jews were the chosen people of God, and they struggled greatly with the idea that Christ was God. For them to accept this premise would require humbling themselves before Jesus, and of course this they could not bring themselves to do. They were content with the way things were. Fundamentally this is an issue of the heart. The Jews were self-satisfied in their position as the chosen people of God and as the sons and daughters of Abraham. There was a pride in their heritage, they didn't need this Jesus. Of course their pride blinded them to the reality of God standing right there in front of them. Many believed, but more refused. As they continued to press for answers that would be acceptable to them, Jesus offhandedly made the remark, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it, and was glad." Of course in their thinking this was ridiculous. Abraham lived centuries before and could not possibly have seen this man alive here in their midst, and they respond with obvious incredulity. "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?" Jesus anticipated their answer. I would even suggest that He set up the conversation to lead them to this question so that He might make it clear exactly what He was claiming for Himself. Christ answered the Jews with the same answer that God gave to Moses at the burning bush, when Moses asked, "Who should I say sent me?" The answer given to Moses was foundational to the Jewish understanding of their liberation from slavery in Egypt. The self-existent God, the source of all being, the source of life and creation identified Himself to Moses: "I AM that I AM." And Jesus identified Himself to the Jews in the same way. "I say unto you, before Abraham was, I AM." Yet where Moses, the prophet who led the Jews out of slavery, responded in faith, the Jews of Christ's day responded in contempt and hate, taking up stones to kill this man who was God. Christ's time had not yet come, so as we read, He "hid himself, and went out of the temple."

So Jesus leaves us without doubt that He is the Messiah, uniquely the Son of God and in fact united with God in His substance, His divinity. But why? Why did God become human, enduring the suffering and brokenness of humanity and then the suffering and brokenness of crucifixion? Was it just so that we could feel the injustice of this act responding in indignation and contempt for those his murderers? Was it so that we would shake our heads at the brutality? So we could feel sorrow? Over the centuries and millennia of human experience, many many people have endured suffering and pain. We don't need one more example of that. No, Christ's death accomplished something for humanity. It wasn't merely symbolic. It did something. It was far more than just a terrible way for us to experience catharsis, to rid ourselves of the emotional sadness of human experience through tragedy.

In the epistle lesson this morning, Jesus is shown to be the way to God. First we see that He is our great High Priest. What is a priest? He is one who mediates between God and man. I am a priest because I have been given training and rightly ordered authority to lead us as the

people of God into the presence of God for worship. However I am not a priest in any transcendent way; I am not able to take away sins or to make you righteous, save by declaring the truth of God. I am just like you, and, in fact, you are just like me, for in Christ we are all a nation of priests. Christ, as our great high priest, is the only true mediator between God and man. My role is simply one of order and authority, and of gifting in the Holy Spirit through my ordination, to lead this parish into a deeper love for and knowledge of God, and into a more devout obedience to Him.

Christ, on the other hand, being both God and man, is our great high priest. Through the tabernacle of His resurrected body, He has entered the heavenly tabernacle, offering to God the Father the blood of the perfect sacrifice. The sin of humanity has been washed away through the sacrifice of Christ, and now in Christ, perfected humanity resides with God in the heavenly Holy of Holies. Our human nature now is welcomed into the presence of God, whereas prior to Christ, mankind was alienated from God. And now God views us, those who are baptized into Christ Jesus, as existing in Christ Jesus and therefore as restored to fellowship with God. Christ is our Great High priest. He is the only one who truly mediates for us to God and reveals God to us. He is the Door to everlasting life. He is the only Way to the eternal God. And He is the truth. No man comes to the Father, but through Jesus Christ.

And more than that, Christ is not only our Great High Priest, but Christ is the once and for all sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world. The epistle lesson this morning compares the sacrifice that Christ made to the Old Covenant sacrifice of the Jewish Day of Atonement. This sacrifice was made annually by the Jewish High Priest. A perfect animal was killed, and its blood collected to be sprinkled upon the people as a testimony that the death of their sin was taken by this animal. Then with the blood of the sacrifice, the priest would enter into the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle, into the presence of God, to plead for the people that God, the “I AM that I AM” would forgive their sins. Now these ceremonies were symbolic; they were promissory; for, as the reading today states, the blood of bulls and goats could not really remove any sin, let alone the sin of the whole human race. And the most obvious argument for this is that the ceremony was perpetually repeated every year. This sacrifice wasn't truly effectual. It was a promise of the final sacrifice to come in the person of Jesus. A human being was required to make atonement for humanity. And the omnipresent and eternal God was required to bear the sins of the whole world, to be the perfect sacrifice that would truly cleanse us of all sin, and to remove the guilt and shame of them from our souls.

This sacrifice was not to be repeated for it truly was perfect. Christ, the perfect spotless lamb, who takest away the sins of the world, died once for us upon the cross. He made one oblation of Himself, once offered, and in that oblation and sacrifice, in that death, we find life,

abundant life, everlasting life, for we are now united to God in Christ. No longer are we estranged and exiled, but we are welcomed into the loving embrace of our Eternal Father through Jesus Christ. He is our mediator and our sacrifice. In the words of the ancient hymn, Christ is both Priest and Victim, willingly laying down His life so that we would gain eternity.

All may be saved in Jesus, but not all are saved. Jesus offers Himself to all, but sadly many do not have time for Him. We are too busy chasing the things of the world. We are too busy amusing ourselves going from one excitement, one distraction, to another. It is a mercy that God brings us to the end of ourselves. It is a mercy when we realize that these things do not have lasting value. The fancy cars break, the adrenaline filled rush fades and is forgotten, and we eventually realize that the emptiness in our soul cannot be filled even if we were to gain the whole world.

The gospel lesson today begins, "JESUS said, Which of you convinceth me of sin? and if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God's words; ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God." The world which surrounds us will attack the person of Jesus saying that He is just a man like any man and certainly not sinless and certainly not God. The world will attack the words of Jesus, too, saying that He might have been a great teacher, but His words weren't divine, that they were no different than any other great teacher's words. But Jesus responds, saying that a person who has not been given faith, who does not belong to God, who is not of God, cannot hear the Words of God. Jesus is the Word of God. Do you hear Him? Do you hear the Words of God spoken to you in love, poured out for you through His blood, resurrected for you in divine power, and mediating for you before the heavenly throne of the Father?

Yes, thanks be to God that He in His mercy has opened our ears to hear the Words of Jesus who is Himself the Word of God. But what shall we do now? That initial faith given to us is the beginning of a life with God, in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, but let us not stop at this beginning. Let us always strive to go deeper into this life of God. As Christians, every day is a renewal of the New Covenant of faith made in the blood of Jesus. Every day is a gift through which we may show our love for God in living for God and serving Jesus in this world by loving and ministering to those around us.

Christ is God; we know the Father through Him. Christ is our Great High Priest representing redeemed humanity to the Father and pleading for us to Him. And Christ is the perfect sacrifice, the spotless lamb, through which we are redeemed. Truly, truly, all things are of Christ. May our lives reflect this truth in the world, so that we which are called might receive

the promise of the eternal inheritance.

As we enter into this most holy season, when these realities become most prominent in our meditations and in our hearts, let us again come to the table of the Lord. And let us again be confirmed in our union with Christ, our Great High Priest, and the Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world. AMEN.