

[CHRIST'S SERMON OF COMFORT AND WARNING]

Sermon for the Sunday after Christ's Ascension; John 15:26-16:4

A Sermon by Martin Luther; taken from his Church Postil, 1522

1. Beloved, you have heretofore heard much about faith. Today you hear also of the witness of faith and of the cross that follows. Paul says to the Romans, "With the heart man believeth unto righteousness." Rom 10, 10. If one be pious, he must begin in his heart and believe. That serves only unto godliness; it is not enough for salvation. Therefore, one must also do what the Christian life requires, and continually abide in that life. Hence, Paul adds: "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, thou shalt be saved," It is these two things that constitute our salvation, faith and the confession of faith. Faith rescues from sin, hell, Satan, death and all misfortunes. Now, when we have this we have enough. We then let God live here that we may reach a hand to our neighbour and help him. Besides, God desires to have his name praised and his kingdom developed and extended. Therefore, we must praise his name, confess our faith and win others to do the same, so that God's kingdom may be extended and his name praised.

2. Thus, faith must be exercised, worked and polished; be purified by fire, like gold. Faith, the great gift and treasure from God, must express itself and triumph in the certainty that it is right before God and man, and before angels, devils and the whole world. Just as a jewel is not to be concealed, but to be worn in sight, so also, will and must faith be worn and exhibited, as it is written in 1 Peter 1, 7: "That the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold that perisheth though it is proved by fire," etc.

3. Now, by confession I must take upon myself the load of Satan, hell, death and the whole world--kings and princes, pope and bishops, priests and monks. By faith, everything falls that reason can or ever has devised for the salvation of the soul. It must chastise the apish tricks of the whole world, and its jewel alone must be praised. The world cannot endure this, therefore it rushes in, destroys, kills, and says: "It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not," as Caiaphas says in Jn 11, 50. Thus, the confession must break forth, that God alone is the Saviour; and the same confession brings us into danger of losing our lives. As the Lord says later to the disciples: "They shall put you out of the synagogues."

4. One cannot paint the cross differently than it is here painted; that is its true color. But the cross of illness--to lie in bed at home ill--is nothing compared with the cross of persecution. The first is indeed suffering: but the suffering is golden when we are persecuted and put to death with ignominy; when our persecutors have the praise; when right and honour apparently are on their side, while shame, disgrace and injustice are on our side, compared with the world that wishes them thereby to have God's honour defended, so that all the world says we are served right and that God, the Scriptures and all the angels witness against us. There can be no right in our cause, and without trial we must be banished and isolated in shame and disgrace. So it also was the lot of Christ--they put him to death in the most scornful and disgraceful way, and crucified him between two thieves or murderers; he was regarded as chief of sinners, and they said, with blasphemous words: Aye, he called himself God's Son; let God help him now, if he wills it differently. Since he does not, God and all the angels must be against him. So Christ says in our Gospel, "They will kill you," and not in an ordinary way, but in an infamous manner, and all the world will say that they thereby offer God a service. It is, indeed, hard to hold and confess that God is gracious to us and that we have a Saviour who opposes all the world, all its glitter and shine. But, let the struggle be as hard and sharp as it will, faith must express itself, even though we would like to have it otherwise.

5. Faith must expect all this, and nothing follows its confession more surely than the cross. For it is certain to come

to us, either in life or at death, that all our doings will appear to be opposed to God and the Scriptures. It is better that it be learned during life, from the people, than from the devil at death; for the people cannot force it further than into the ears, but Satan has a pointed tongue that pierces the heart and makes the heart tremble. Satan torments you until you conclude that you are lost and ruined, that heaven and earth, God and all the angels, are your enemies. This is what the prophet means in Ps 6, 7-8, when he says: "I am weary with my groaning; every night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears. Mine eye wasteth away because of grief; it waxeth old because of all mine adversaries." It is hard to endure this. Now you see how weak you are who are permitted to bear witness of this faith. One fears his wife, another his children and riches, and a third fears himself.

6. Faith is in vain where it does not continue steadfast to the end. Christ says in Mt 10, 22, and 24, 13: "But he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved. Hence it is better to experience persecution here than punishment at the end. If one flees persecution, there is no faith in his heart --only a dead knowledge or erroneous belief, without sap and strength, marrow and bone; but where there is a true, living faith, it presses forward through sword and fire. Let us now notice how the Lord comforts his disciples. He says: "But when the Comforter is come."

I. CHRIST'S SERMON OF COMFORT.

7. That we may, under no circumstances, despair, Christ says, I will send you a Comforter, even one who is almighty. And he calls the Holy Spirit here a Comforter; for although both my sins and the fear of death make me weak and timid, he comes and stirs up the courage in my heart, and says: Ho, cheer up! Thus he trumpets courage into us; he encourages us in a friendly and comforting manner not to despair before death but to cheerfully go forward, even though we had ten necks for the executioner, and says: Aye, although I have sinned, yet I am rid of my sins; and if I had still more, so that they overwhelmed me, I would hope, that they should do me no harm. Not that one should not feel his sins, for the flesh must experience them; but the Spirit overcomes and suppresses diffidence and timidity, and conducts us through them. He is powerful enough to do that. Therefore, Christ says further: "Whom I will send unto you from the Father."

8. For he, the Father, is the person that takes the initiative: I am the Son; and from us the Holy Spirit proceeds. And the three persons are one, and one essence, with equal power and authority, as he better expresses it when he says: "The Spirit of truth, who proceedeth from the Father."

9. That is as much as to say: He who will comfort you is almighty and Lord over all things. How can the creatures now harm us, if the Creator stands by us? Notice how great the comfort of the Holy Spirit is. Now let all the Turks attack us. As long as he is our guard and rearguard, there is no danger. John also says in his first Epistle, 3, 19-20: "Hereby shall we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before him; because if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things." Likewise, in the following chapter, verse 4, he says: "Ye are of God, my little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world." So the Lord now says, Him will I send unto you, so that nothing can harm you. Is not that liberal comfort? Who would not be fearless and cheerful in view of this? And Christ calls him "The Spirit of truth;" that is, where he is and comes there is a rock foundation through and through, the real truth. Neither falsehood nor hypocrisy is there, for the Spirit is not hypocritical. But wherever he is not, there is nothing but hypocrisy and falsehood. Therefore, we fall when the test comes, because the Spirit of truth is not present. Christ now further says: "He shall bear witness of me."

10. That is, if he is in the heart he speaks through you, and assures and confirms you in the belief that the Gospel is true. Then, as a result, the confession of the Gospel springs forth. What, then, is the Gospel? It is a witness concerning Christ, that he is God's Son, the Saviour, and beside him there is none other. This is what Peter means when he says: "Ye are a royal priesthood, that we are elected thereto, that we preach and show forth the excellencies of Christ." 1 Pet 2, 9. Hence, there must always be witnessing. Witnessing loads upon itself the wrath of the whole world. Then the cross follows, then rebellions rise, then the lords and princes and all who are great become angry; for the world cannot hear, nor will it tolerate, this kind of preaching. Therefore, the Gospel is hated and spoken against.

11. Reason thinks: Aye, one can, nevertheless, easily preach the Gospel in a beautifully simple and plain way,

without a revolution in the world, and then it will be heartily welcomed. This is the utterance of Satan; for if I believe and say that faith in Christ alone does and accomplishes all, I overthrow the monkey play of the whole world; and that they cannot allow. Therefore, Christ's teachings and man's teachings cannot stand together; one must fall. Priests and monks, as they are at present, are dependent in name, character and works upon human institutions, which the Gospel thrusts to the ground. Hence, they dare not accept the Gospel, and they continue as they are.

12. Thus, I say that the Christian faith is founded upon Christ alone, without anything additional. The priests will not permit their affairs and institutions to fall; in consequence, seditions and rebellions follow. Therefore, there must be dissension where the Gospel and the confession of Christ are; for the Gospel opposes everything that is not of its own spirit. If the teachings of Christ and the priests were not antagonistic, they could easily stand together. They are now pitted against one another. As impossible as it is for Christ not to be Christ, so impossible is it for a monk or priest to be a Christian. Therefore, a fire must be kindled. The Lord himself, in Mt 10, 34 and Lk 12, 51 says: "I came not to send peace, but a sword." Then follows in our text: "And ye also bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning."

13. Yes; then, first, when you become certain of your faith through the Holy Spirit, who is your witness, you must also bear witness of me, for to that end I chose you to be apostles. You have heard my words and teachings and have seen my works and life and all things that you are to preach. But the Holy Spirit must first be present; otherwise you can do nothing, for the conscience is too weak. Yes, there is no sin so small that the conscience could vanquish it, even if it were so trifling a one as laughing in church. Again, in the presence of death the conscience is far too weak to offer resistance. Therefore another must come and give to the timid, despairing conscience, courage to go through everything, although all sins be upon it. And it must, at the same time, be an almighty courage, like he alone can give who ministers strength in such a way that the courage, which before a rustling leaf could cause to fear, is now not afraid of all the devils, and the conscience that before could not restrain laughing, now restrains all sins.

14. The benefit and fruit of the Holy Spirit is, that sin will be changed to the highest and best use. Thus Paul boasts to Timothy, when he was converted, that whereas he had lived such a wicked life before, he now held his sin to be so contemptible that he composed a hymn and sang about it thus, in 1 Tim 1, 12-17: "I thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord, for that he counted me faithful, appointing me to his service; though I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: howbeit I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord abounded exceedingly with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief: howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me as chief might Jesus Christ show forth all his longsuffering, for an example of them that should thereafter believe on him unto eternal life. Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen."

II. CHRIST'S SERMON OF WARNING.

"These things have I spoken unto you that ye should not be caused to stumble."

15. Now that Christ had comforted and strengthened his disciples, he warns them of their future sufferings, in order that they might be able to bear them valiantly. He is an especially good friend who warns one; and the evil visitation is much easier borne when one is prepared beforehand for it. Christ says: "They shall put you out of the synagogues; yea, the hour cometh that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service unto God."

16. You will certainly experience this; therefore, arm yourself and be prepared. The most of all will be that, when they have treated you in the most shameless manner, they will think they did a good work in doing so, and it will appear to them as if your God had taken stand against you, and they will sing over it a Te Deum laudamus (Lord God, we praise thee), as if they had done God's will and offered unto him a service. Hence, he arms them here, that they may be of good courage when it comes to pass; and he concludes with the thought that they shall have God's favor, although at the time there shall be no signs of it; for God does stand on the side of his disciples. He adds: "And these things will they do, because they have not known the Father, nor me."

17. Therefore, be patient, be prepared, be firm. See to it that ye, by no means, take offence at me. Remember that I told you before that they have known neither the Father nor me; and therefore they will heap upon you dishonour, shame and persecution. You should never forget this, for it will give you great comfort and make you bold, cheerful and undismayed. Therefore, Christ concludes the admonition by saying: "But these things have I spoken unto you, that when their hour is come, ye may remember them, how that I told you. And these things I said not unto you from the beginning, because I was with you."

18. Who, now, has been considered to be worse than he who told the pope that he knew not the Father? The pope would, of course, declare the contrary and say: Aye, Satan has commissioned you to speak that. Now, they all say that they know the Father. The Turk also says that he does. In like manner, they declare they believe God and the Scriptures. But there are two kinds of knowledge. The first for example, such knowledge as one might have of the Turk from his noise and reputation; the other the knowledge one would have of the Turk through his deeds were he to capture and occupy Rome. In this latter sense we do not know the Turk.

19. It is this first kind of knowledge that some people have of God. They know very well how to say of him: I believe in God the Father, and in his only begotten Son. But it is only upon the tongue, like the foam on the water; it does not enter the heart. Figuratively a big tumor still remains there in the heart; that is, they cling somewhat to their own deeds and think they must do works in order to be saved--that Christ's person and merit are not sufficient. Thy work is nothing, thy wisdom is foolishness, thy counsel is nothing, thy truth also amounts to nothing, neither does the mass avail anything before God. Then they reply: Aye, the devil has prompted you to speak thus. They say, Christ has truly died for us, but in a way that we, also, must accomplish something by our deeds. Notice how deeply wickedness and unbelief are rooted in the heart. The puffed-up pride of the heart is the reason why man can know neither Christ nor the Father.

20. But to know Christ in the other and true sense is to know that he died for me and transferred the load of my sin upon himself; to so know this that I realize that all my doings amount to nothing. To let go all that is mine, and value only this, that Christ is given to me as a present; his sufferings, his righteousness and all his virtues are at once mine. When I become conscious of this, I must in return love him; my affections must go out to such a being. After this I climb upon the Son higher, to the Father, and see that Christ is God, and that he placed himself in my death, in my sin, in my misery, and bestows upon me his grace. Then I know also his gracious will and the highest love of the Father, which no heart of itself can discover or experience. Thus I lay hold of God at the point where he is the tenderest, and think: Aye, that is God; that is God's will and pleasure, that Christ did this for me. And with this experience I perceive the high, inexpressible mercy and the love in him because of which he offered his beloved child for me in ignominy, shame and death. That friendly look and lovely sight then sustain me. Thus must God become known, only in Christ. Therefore, Christ himself says to his disciples: "No one knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth any know the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willeth to reveal him." Mt 11, 27.

21. On the other hand, those who parade their own works, do not know Christ. Neither do they know what the Father has done through Christ. Nor do they know that God is not interested in their good works, but in his Son alone. Thus, they do not know the Father, neither do they know what they have received from the Father, through Christ. Therefore, they must fall and perish, and behold God in his severest aspect--as a judge. They try to silence the judgment with their good works, but they find no good work that is sufficient to do this, and then they must finally despair. When people see that they, themselves, are nothing, and establish the foundation of their hearts upon Christ, esteem him as the highest good, and know God as a Father in death and life--this is to "know God." Enough has been said on this Gospel. We will pray to God, to give us grace to know him and his Christ aright. Amen.

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