

ASH WEDNESDAY: READINGS

Jesus Foretells Peter's Denial

JOHN 13:36 Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, where are you going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterwards.”³⁷ Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now? **I will lay down my life for you.**”³⁸ Jesus answered, **“Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the cock will not crow till you have denied me three times.**

SEARCHING QUESTIONS LENTEN SERIES: #1 *Will you lay down your life for me?*

Tonight’s question from Jesus to Peter “Will you lay down your life for me?” takes place in the Upper Room. It’s a question which might at first seem far away from us, removed from our reality as we live in the comparative safety of a religiously tolerant country separated by great time from the days of Peter and Jesus of Nazareth and great distance from Burma, India and other lands where Christians are regularly called to lay down their life for the Saviour.

But as we celebrate the Sacrament this evening we are no longer separated by such temporal things of space and time. In the Sacrament we enter into the same reality experienced by Peter and the rest. It is foremost one of forgiveness and new life, but that means also, even as our catechism teaches, a command to enter into spiritual struggles seen and unseen. Even on the human plane, events of Christian persecution in formerly far away lands are brought closer and more immediate to us than ever before. With so much social media no place in this world can remain a dark corner. I was reading from December’s paper, even in the relatively liberal Toronto Star, of Christian persecution in Burma. But there is more than human advocates for this question to intrude into our lives. The Church, wherever she plants the Holy Word of God stands as a conduit of the Spirit having the question raised in the hearts of her children.

We find our Lord’s question to Peter come to us in our own Confirmation, a rite in the Church I remind you, rooted in our Baptism wherein we are, as Scripture explains, expected to die with him that we might rise from the dead with Him. Do you remember Romans, chapter 6? Do you remember your confirmation vows?

“Do you not know” Paul says in Romans 6, “that³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Do you remember your confirmation vows? Allow me to quote directly from the confirmation rite:

Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?

Maybe you remember a shaky voice coming from a trembling youth that was once you, saying “I do, by the grace of God”. Maybe that shaky voice saying the “I do” over the years would now recite such vows by “rote” or “overconfidence” shared by St. Peter. Such is the spiritual danger facing us all.

We might pay our Lenten cross to bear lip service reading and listening to powerful language even singing “Take up your cross, the Saviour said” but without the trepidation and holy fear that such language ought to evoke. We might think that our cross is made of light stuff and become deluded into believing we can easily heave it about when the spiritual one recognizes how he must become one with the cross of Jesus only and in His strength alone arise to live a new life.

To quote a Lenten Hymn: “Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble” is where we ought to be. Our human powers need reassessment. Our weaknesses need to be examined. The Scriptural teaching concerning our abilities needs to be revisited.

Perhaps there is no greater summary to be found, then in our Small Catechism with Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed.

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or

Come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

The Gospel, is such a word we too easily banter about with familiarity but which we must see at its essence held together by Christ’s work on the cross. We cannot bear our cross until our Lord first bears his cross. We cannot die for Christ until Christ first dies for us and that His death is internalized within us through Holy Baptism.

Then things begin to truly change. Peter wasn’t ready to follow Jesus before His death on the cross. But once that happened, and it happened for him in human time, then wow! We see some spiritual growth. We see humility emerge. We see him step up knowing that it is in weakness that strength is given.

Peter was brought down low in his failures. After his betrayal of the Lord he was reduced to tears by a mere look from the Master. But in repentance Peter was restored. He would demonstrate great strength, as he relied on Christ throughout the rest of his days in proclaiming the Gospel most notably his sermon at Pentecost where, by God’s grace, three thousand were brought to faith in a single day. We think of the miracles that God in Christ Jesus worked through him, so much so that many were eager to simply have his shadow pass over them. There is of course, so much more we could study.

I hate to rush to the end. He would live out the prophecy contained both here in John 13 but also in John 21 in the scene where the resurrected and glorified Christ asks Peter three times if he loves Him, concludes and accepting his vow saying,

¹⁸Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.” ¹⁹(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.) And after saying this he said to him, “Follow me.

Peter, as we learn from the traditional accounts suffered martyrdom, on a cross upside down. Even if I were to read you those meagre accounts there’s no flourishes in the details. There doesn’t need to be. He gave his life. That’s all there was. He gave it back to the one who first gave Him His life.

We will not know when or how we are to give ours. Sometimes, most oftentimes its a life given by degrees. Occasionally it may be in martyrdom. We should wonder how. We should be filled with trembling. Knowing our own inabilities all the more so that we trust in Christ all the more.

We give and we shall give because He gives and continues to give to us. Especially tonight as we receive the Sacrament of the Altar, his neverending source of strength in His body and blood.

May we be so strengthened this evening.

Amen.