

PALMARUM / PALM SUNDAY

Text: The Passion According to St. Matthew

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The hanging of a Corpus, that is the figure of the suffering CHRIST, upon a cross, seems to be a dividing point for many in Christendom. For myself, I find this rather sad, especially so since the empty cross, as opposed to a cross displaying the Body of CHRIST, has become a point of contention even in the Church of the Reformation.

Oh, there are many arguments offered for one's preference to have a naked or barren cross. The two most often heard are: *"It is too Roman Catholic for me,"* or *"My JESUS has risen. He no longer hangs upon the Cross."* The first argument is sad and sinful since it implies there are no Christians in Rome or that Rome is full of idol worshipers. Rome, indeed, has its problems and we do have our differences, but this kind of *"Romaphobia"* exhibits extreme bigotry that must be repented of since it is nothing less than sinful judgment against fellow Christians. It also indicates a deplorable ignorance of our history as Lutherans, since Martin Luther, himself, defended the use of such things as crucifixes, statues, stained glass, and other images, in the life of the Church.

Hear then, what the blessed Doctor Luther had to say:

"The eyes are offended at a death so shameful, so accursed of God... The wood, in itself an accursed wood, is a blessed wood for us, a noble, precious altar, upon which the SON of God sacrificed Himself to God, His FATHER, for our sin. There He lets Himself be seen as the true, eternal Priest who comes to the accursed wood and turns it into a blessed altar for Himself so that we are freed from sins, obtain God's grace, and become His children... In Paradise a beautiful tree caused us to fall into sin and death. Here is an old, dry tree, nay, an accursed wood; but it causes us to become free from sin and to obtain eternal life. For there hangs the SON of God with outstretched arms, in order to testify that He rejects no one, but wants gladly to accept everyone and, as He says, draw all men unto Himself (St. John 12:32). His head is lifted to heaven and shows us the way to eternal life. His feet are hanging below and toward the earth, for He is treading on the head of the old serpent, the devil, who crawls about on the earth; He is taking away all the devil's power. For because He, the dear LORD CHRIST, is hanging there and is paying and rendering satisfaction for our sin with His death, being made a curse for us, the devil, who, because of sin, has obtained power over us, loses his might."

And again:

"We judge the indiscriminate expulsion in many places of the images even of CHRIST and the apostles to be not only barbarism but also a case of remarkable ignorance..."

And again:

"I do not entirely reject images, chiefly not the figure of the crucified CHRIST. We have an image of CHRIST in the Old Testament, the brazen serpent lifted up by Moses in the wilderness, that all who had been bitten by the fiery serpents and looked at this brazen serpent should become well (Numbers 21). We, too, should do this. In order to become well in our souls, we should look at the crucified CHRIST and believe in Him."

And finally:

"Those do far better who hold a crucifix before the eyes of the dying and remind them of the suffering and death of CHRIST."

And why is it that Martin Luther would say and write such things? Because he knew and believed something we modern Lutheran Christians have perhaps long forgotten, that is, that in order to be prepared for our own death, we Christians must *"know that death, sin, hell, and Satan have been overcome and overthrown through CHRIST Crucified, so that we do not look at death as it is in itself or as it appears to us but as it is in CHRIST."* (Martin Luther)

This, then, would be the answer to the second argument as well, for no man, woman, or child was ever saved by an empty cross, nor by an empty tomb for that matter. We were saved by the God-Man, JESUS CHRIST, who was put to death on the Cross for our sins. Thus, does Saint Paul write, *"For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."* And also, *"For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."*

"But, Pastor," one might argue, *"is this not an adiaphoron, an indifferent thing?"* My reply? *"Yes, certainly it is. That is if you mean by 'indifferent thing' that a crucifix is neither commanded nor is it forbidden by Holy Scripture."* But it has been my experience that when one uses this argument it is for something over which they are emphatically **not indifferent at all**. What they truly mean is *"I want my way and you must be tolerant of my feelings and my choice. You must please me. After all, it is an indifferent thing."*

Such is the arrogance of sinful man. I also find such an argument somewhat humorous since the same people who argue against the corpus on a cross saying *"My JESUS is no longer on the Cross,"* will demand an infant be placed in the manger even though Jesus is no longer there either.

Still, there is something even deeper than our incredible arrogance that makes one uncomfortable with the Cross of JESUS. You see, in truth, crucifixes remind us of something about ourselves we would much rather forget. When we see the representation of our LORD JESUS upon the Cross, it prevents us from moral self-satisfaction and self-absorption.

A crucifix denies such self-righteousness because a crucifix demands that when we look upon it, we also look upon ourselves, and when we look in that mirror, we are decidedly unhappy with what we behold. For when we are confronted by the abomination of the crucifix, we see our own faces in the faceless crowd before Pontius Pilate and on Golgotha. We see ourselves shaking our fists and mocking and spitting upon CHRIST. We hear ourselves saying: *“Let Him be Crucified!” “His Blood be on us and on our children.” “If you are the SON of God, come down from the Cross.”*

So, many of us would breathe much easier if we were never to see a crucifix or hear about JESUS and His Cross and Passion. Our faith is much easier if we just bypass the crucifixion altogether and go straight on to glory. *“So, no crucifixes, please. I would rather you sanitize my justification, making it bloodless and thus, I can fool myself into believing that I am not all that bad; JESUS need not have gone to all that trouble for me.”*

However, that leaves us with a very real question; if we leave out the Passion of the CHRIST, if we leave out the crucifixion and the Cross of JESUS, what is there left to preach and teach? What does the Bible mean without the death of JESUS, if it then means anything at all? What need at all then, do we have of the Church or the Christian religion?

You see the whole of Christianity culminates in this final week of JESUS’ earthly ministry. This week, the week of the Passion of our LORD, JESUS CHRIST, is the sum total of our hope and faith. Without it, the Nativity means little, if anything at all. Without it, there is no resurrection of JESUS, and that means no resurrection for us. We would be lost; dead in our sins and condemned forever, the Bible little more than a coffee table book of moral virtues that are powerless to save anyone.

So, the Passion of JESUS, His bloody crucifixion and death on the Cross, stands as a boundary between faith and unbelief, between salvation and condemnation. As we have heard, Holy Scripture tells us that the Cross of CHRIST is the reason some believe and some do not. It is a stumbling block and foolishness to those who refuse to place their faith completely in it as the saving work of JESUS CHRIST. And remember, without the crucifixion, there is no resurrection, and we are, every one of us, still dead in our sins, with the grave and eternal death our only future.

Roman soldiers and the Jewish authorities knew that JESUS came back from the dead, but they vehemently denied it. Opinion polls tell us that the overwhelming majority of Americans call themselves Christian and believe in the resurrection of JESUS. But this belief means little more to most of them than it did to those who saw the resurrection and denied it. If this were not true, the true churches of our great land would be filled every Sunday to overflowing. Their

emptiness testifies against such empty faith. True Christians would never dream of missing a chance to be in the presence of the resurrected JESUS.

Still, the resurrection itself does not teach the faith. Our LORD, Himself, once said, *“neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.”* No, miracles do not teach the faith. Consider the reaction of the Jews after JESUS fed the five thousand. The Jews attempted to make JESUS king, not because they believed Him to be the SON of God, but because they *“ate of the loaves and were filled.”* After this great miracle, JESUS was left with only the twelve disciples. Everyone else deserted Him. So, no, miracles, even the resurrection miracle, do not teach faith; it is the blood-soaked Cross of JESUS CHRIST that teaches faith.

We cannot deny the Cross of JESUS. We cannot ignore His Passion. The resurrection does not mean that the crucifixion and death of JESUS are behind us, safely tucked away on some shelf in a box marked *“JESUS Memorabilia.”* The crucifixion of CHRIST cannot be safely tucked away in the past, never to be seen again. The crucifixion of our LORD is *the* defining moment in all of human history and *transcends* all time. Our LORD, JESUS, is *“the Lamb slain from the foundations of the world.”*

This means that JESUS’ crucifixion is the moment promised by God in the Garden of Eden to Adam and Eve; it is the Day seen by Abraham who rejoiced in it; it is the moment looked forward to by God’s faithful in ancient Israel; it is the moment to which all the Old Testament sacrifices point; and it is the moment looked back upon by all the faithful since that fateful day. The scars of that moment, our LORD JESUS will wear forever; scars left for the probing fingers of doubting Thomases such as you and I. For He is the Lamb who was slain and yet lives; He is forever CHRIST the crucified.

JESUS was crucified to give us life. He was crucified for us because He loved the unlovable. He was crucified for those who hated Him, betrayed Him, and murdered Him. JESUS was crucified despite the hatred, despite being betrayed by those He loves, despite our rebellious hearts and treachery, or perhaps, no not perhaps, but specifically because of those reasons. JESUS was crucified and died so that we may live. This is the Passion of the CHRIST and the reason He gave Himself up to crucifixion and death: to take on the guilt and sin of the world—to take on our sin—and die an agonizing death reserved for only the most heinous of criminals, offering Himself as a ransom that we be reconciled to God and live with Him forever.

Yes, JESUS was crucified and died and the criminals, that is, we, live. The LORD of life has defeated death by submitting to it. JESUS died, but He has taken up His life again and in taking up His life, JESUS left death in the grave. Now you, criminals no longer, are given the name *“Barabbas,”* which means *“son of the father.”* In this JESUS has made you like Himself, a child of His FATHER, and with Him, you will enjoy everlasting life in Heaven. It is only JESUS’ crucifixion and faith in its great victory over sin, Satan, and the grave that make this so.

In this way, through the Passion of JESUS in His crucifixion, His very Blood *is “on us and our children.”* For it is JESUS’ Blood that washes us clean making us righteous before God. And it is this same Blood in the waters of Baptism that seals our adoption as children of God.

That same Blood, the Blood that dripped as sweat in Gethsemane, that stained the centurion's spear, the Blood that His broken heart ceased to pump; that Blood marks the doorposts of your heart—your lips and your tongue—as it pours forth from the Chalice into your mouth and into your heart. His life is poured into you that death passes over you.

JESUS' Passion, His agony and bloody sweat, His crucifixion, His precious death and burial, all are about His love and the lengths to which God has gone to rescue you from death. Nothing could be more distorted than to deny His Body hanging from a Cross as the greatest symbol of our faith and salvation. For all He did, He did to remove the guilt and the stain of sin, bind up hearts, and bestow joy. He laid His life down of His own accord. Then He took it up again. JESUS knew what He was doing and He did it to set you free. He knew the cost and gladly paid it.

So now, we embark upon our holiest week, our most solemn celebration. We commemorate the institution of the New Testament in JESUS' Blood, the destruction of Hell and all its power over us in JESUS' holy death, and the vindication of His Kingship on the day of His resurrection. Therefore, *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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