

The Third Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Romans 6:12-23

Matthew 10:5a, 21-33

Would you rather be faithful or popular? Not both, mind you, but one or the other – would you rather be faithful and true or popular, regarded by those who are fashionable, well regarded by the “in-crowd”? Have you ever hidden your opinion, a good opinion, a well-grounded opinion on some matter or another because to speak up would result in you losing friends, losing status, losing something you valued? That’s a rhetorical question because I already know what the answer is. I know that you have failed to stand up for what is right at one time or another. It is a universal; you are guilty and I am guilty. It is a certain type of cowardice, a failure of conviction, a sinful desire to avoid suffering at all costs. After you’ve done this, after you’ve shrunk from the moment, imagine yourself climbing into bed that night, safe and warm and congratulating yourself on protecting your precious reputation. Yep, I really accomplished something today. I violated my conscience and let the truth suffer. Good on me!

I suspect the feeling was quite different. I suspect that it was bitter fruit in your mouth that night. To the extent that you thought of it at all – and it was less painful to avoid thinking about it, your failure – to the extent that you thought about it at all you winced and vowed to improve. No one likes the bitter taste of failure in their mouth in the dark watches of the night, so we make vows to improve in order to cleanse our palate and make sleeping easier. No one likes committing the same sins over and over – no Christian, at least, no one who possesses the Spirit of God enjoys going to the same cesspool of self-indulgence, self-gratification over and over (those things that violate God’s law and hurt others either directly or indirectly). Slaves to unrighteousness – that’s what St. Paul calls it, slaves to impurity and lawlessness, slaves to sin. He asks the Romans who had converted to Christianity: “What fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death” (Romans 6:21). It’s a good/valid question. What uplift does sin give to your spirit? What consolation is there in cowardice? These two things run in parallel down our sinful nature – self-gratification and cowardice. It’s time to turn to something better.

The cross of Christ is what is better. It’s time to turn there – again, completely, turn humbly, happily. Here’s the Savior of the world emboldening His disciples for some pretty grim days. Did you hear Him explain to those He loved what was going to be coming their way? Hatred, persecution, and death – it’s not a trip to Baskin Robbins, this Christianity thing. Christians are to be made of hearty stuff. Like Alexamenos; perhaps you have never heard of Alexamenos. Well, you’ll remember him after today. Perhaps the earliest existing (extant) depiction of the Lord Christ being crucified is a bit of graffiti found on the wall of a room near the Palatine Hill in Rome. It’s estimated to be made around the year 200. Its message is simple. There is a crude line drawing of a man on a cross, only the man has the head of a donkey, a mule. An equally juvenile inscription accompanies the drawing, in elementary Greek. “Alexamenos worships his god.” And there is Alexamenos, drawn into the scene by whoever wanted to ridicule him. Do you get it? Alexamenos, known among his contemporaries to be a Christian in the year 200. His peers mock his faith, portraying the Crucified King with the head of a donkey. Alexamenos worships his god, a total loser who is depicted as a lowly donkey.

Think about this for a minute. A young lad, perhaps 12, living in pre-Constantinian Rome. A known Christian, Alexamenos comes under merciless ridicule. It becomes known that Alexamenos believes that the Son of God was crucified to take away his sins. It becomes known that Alexamenos believes that this Jesus is risen from the dead and extends His resurrection victory to those who believe in Him. Converted from unbelief and taught the Christian faith, Alexamenos is baptized, buried with Christ in Holy Baptism and raised a new creation. On Sundays, Alexamenos is found with other believers, hearing the Word of God and partaking in Christ's body and blood in the eucharist. A young lad, subject to the same playground cruelty that you have seen, that you have known, and he is the perpetual object of ancient scorn, secular scorn, hostile and hateful.

Jesus said: "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household" (Matthew 10:25). We don't know anything about Alexamenos, do we? We know only that he was mocked, that he lived around the year 200 and that he was likely a youngster. The rest is conjecture, right? We can't say anything definitively about this young lad, right? Wrong. We know that Alexamenos was a Christian. We know that he had been crucified with Christ and that he no longer lived but Christ lived in him, and the life Alexamenos lived in the body he lived by faith in the Son of God who loved him and gave Himself up for him (Galatians 2:20). We know that Alexamenos was a sheep who was called by name by the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life that that young lad might have life to the full (John 10:3,10). We know that the Holy Spirit rested upon Alexamenos and led him, strengthened him, breathed life into His faith, caused him to stand.

So many, so very many have faced what you face. On every continent, in every language, in every age, across the span of this globe – the name of your Lord is ridiculed and you, by extension, become a potential object of scorn. And your sinful nature wants to quit, to sneak away, to hide and silence your voice and pretend that the name of Jesus Christ is not worth confessing, that your allegiance lies elsewhere, that you don't take any of this Christianity stuff seriously, that you go with the crowd, that you laugh at morality, that you don't believe that sexual relations is reserved for marriage, don't believe that we are to remain sober, that our speech is to be free from what is profane, that women are a treasure not objects of lust, that life is more than possessions, that virtue means something deeply valuable in this and every age. To blend into whatever background you find yourself in is cowardly, self-indulgent and cowardly. The old man, the sinful man does not want to suffer and will do and say anything to prevent suffering. That sinful nature is in you. Repent.

But there is more in you than that – a new man lives in you, the resurrected man, the God/man. He has taken up His position in you (John 14:20). He has a stake in you, His beloved. Listen to His words: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master" (Matthew 10:25). That is His work. That is what the Lord Christ is accomplishing in you. You are the clay, God is the potter and He is at work, molding you into the image of His beloved Son (Isaiah 64:8, John 5:17, Romans 8:29). Like Christ; you are being made like Christ – what a wonder! What a privilege! What aspect of life could be better? Courage, fortitude, humility, love, and a sacrificial spirit – that is what lives in you for the Lord Christ lives in you. He is making you like Himself – it is a

baptismal reality. He is the vine and you are the branch – like Alexamenos – a branch attached to the Crucified King. He is at work in you to produce much fruit. When? When it is dark and hard and chaotic and uncertain – fruit that attests that you belong to Him. Now is that time. We will not falter. We will stand.

“The one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22). So said our Lord. Did He endure? Did He walk steadfastly toward His end, His cross, His sacrifice? Yes, He did; He most certainly did. That is our triumph, a very present victory which He gives to us in His body and blood. We are saved in Him. We have been set free from sin and death and we live in the One who endured to the end. Sin and death have no dominion over us for we are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:14). Cowardice and self-gratification are cast out, exorcised. What Christ whispers to us in His Word we proclaim from the housetops. What do we proclaim? “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Romans 1:16-17). You, beloved of Christ the King, you are the righteous. Because of Christ’s cross, because of His resurrection, you are the righteous and you most certainly live.