

Ascension Thursday, May 21, 2009 Mark 16:14-20

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Lord charged the apostles: **“Preach the Gospel to every creature.”** Then He added a promise about Baptism. It is not a charge to visit, to clothe, to house, or to fix marriages. It is not even a charge to lead. It is certainly not to grow like a business as though Our Lord instituted capitalism! It is to baptize, to preach, to feed, to forgive. That is the charter and purpose of the Church. She has nothing else. Just this: the Gospel. And that, to be preached.

For in the days of Pontius Pilate the dust outside of Jerusalem was made thick with tears and with sweat. Selfish men gathered there to erect a cruel tree: beams of wood crossed in hate. They lifted up from the earth the Stone they had rejected but God had anointed. The mud grew slick with His blood. They tore down the Temple not built with hands as He tore the Temple veil in two and exposed His mercy for all to see. They raised up the Stone upon a deranged device designed for painful death. And there God built a Church!

Even so, the disciples wept. The wind and the sky covered their ears with darkness for the shame. They sought to shut out the blasphemy of men drunk on violence and the will to power. The hills shook with rage and frustration. They let go of the dead in protest of the priesthood's perversion and false sacrifice. That holy day, creation mourned for the price God paid.

But what men meant for evil, God meant for good. It was not the death of life, but of death. When that Good Shepherd laid down His life, when He breathed His last and died, suffering His soul to be separated for a time from His body, it was the end of death. It was the beginning of life, the laying of the cornerstone. Death was finished. Hell was finished. The Law was finished. Creation's subjection to the grave's sting and haunting dominion was ended. The future could begin for God's will was and is now done. That cruel scaffold, those beams crossed with hate, is the emblem of perfect love, of enduring grace, of God's true glory. The tears they inspire in us are not of sadness but of joy and gratitude. For in the water and the blood that slipped down the cross forgiveness and mercy were born. The place of the skull is the burial ground of death and Hell's certain defeat.

The long-expected Christ rested in the tomb. It was not punishment or payment. It was the reward for His faithfulness. According to the pattern of the first creation also the second. The Creator finished the recreation on the 6th day. It was good. On the 7th day, the Creator rested. Then the Creator rose. For forty days, He was present amongst His people, Creator and creatures, Redeemer and redeemed, Giver, Sustainer, Lover, Counselor, and believers. He opened the Scriptures to them. He set their hearts afire with His love. He comforted them in His scars. He spoke peace to them and delivered the keys to heaven.

Then He ascended. He rose up from the earth again. He went bodily into heaven. He had come to earth Thirty-odd years before as God to become Man. He left earth as Man become God. His Holy Spirit had overshadowed the Virgin. He had joined His Godhead to humanity. He has forever elevated the sons and daughters of Adam. He who was Priest and Sacrifice, Law-Giver

and Law-fulfiller, is forever God and Man. He took up your frail flesh, O sinner! With it He made a sacrifice worthy of all that Justice could demand of you and of all mankind. He ascended as that Divine Man and has caused the angel of death to pass over you and all those marked with the bloody waters of Holy Baptism. He is the Enfleshment of Abraham's God, the Lord without beginning who was issued forth in time from Mary's womb.

So He has rescued you from Satan's grasp and is your true Brother. He has redeemed you from death. He goes to the right hand of the Father for you, as one of us, to be your Advocate. He paves the way into paradise for you. For you are His brother and His friend. You are worthy of His love by the power of invitation; by the declaration and delivery of His Name. He has made you His and member of the royal family by Grace.

Of course, it is utter foolishness. The Gospel always is. And the worst thing, the most difficult part, is that it is all for free. That is the way of the Gospel. And it is ever a stumbling block to fallen flesh. It is overly simple: Preach the Gospel to every creature. Never hold a man's sins against him. Let everyone off the hook for free, for My sake, in My Name. Don't make it work. Just preach. Live by faith. Never charge a cent. Never persuade through fancy words. Never appeal to felt needs. Never compete in the marketplace. Never measure your success. Never force yourself on anyone. And - and - let your enemies kill you. Turn the other cheek. Take up your cross and follow Me.

Preach the Gospel to every creature. Proclaim the death Christ died and the life He lives for you and for them. He ascended, but He is not gone. He lives. And He still gives His life to and for you, not in a bloodless sacrifice, but in purest gift. He gives not mere bread and wine, but His very self, His Body and His Blood. It is the fruit of the Cross. He joins Himself, the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord, the Victor over death and Promise fulfilled, to you. He joins Himself to you in a perfect communion, a foretaste of the feast to come, a sampling of grace too sublime for the thoughts and words and songs of men. It is a miracle of the altar of the cross turned into a table. It burns the lips of men and purifies them. It cleanses them from the inside out. It is Jesus. It is the Gospel. And it will do more than spare you from poison and serpents. It will bring you to Him in heaven.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.