

Lent 5

Psalm 43; 1 Peter 4:12-19; Galatians 6:12-18; John 21:15-19; Hymns 427 837

For the past five weeks we have been meditating on the cross of Christ. Through all of these meditations, one thing has become absolutely clear: The cross is not incidental to the Christian faith. It is absolutely central. It is central on every possible level so that there is nothing in heaven or on earth which can rightly be understood apart from the cross of Jesus Christ. We began these meditations by exploring the most obvious point. That our salvation cannot be conceived apart from Jesus' suffering and death. The cross was not an alternate path to glory—necessitated because Plan A failed. The cross is not one way to save us that God chose from a smorgasbord of options. The crucifixion of Jesus was the plan from the very foundation of the world. From this starting point, our exploration of the cross led us deeper still. We came to understand that Jesus Himself, in His person, can only be understood through the shame and humiliation and suffering of the cross. The incarnation of the Son of God into the flesh does not leave open the question of what this incarnate God should now DO with His newborn flesh and blood. Rather, God is incarnated precisely for the cross. The cross is hard-wired into the incarnation and there's no other possible outcome. From here, the Spirit led us to say even more of the cross of Christ. For it not only reveals the very nature of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God... More than that, in the cross alone do we come to understand the Father Himself! This was the point of last week's meditation. Christ went to the cross not independent of the Father's loving will—but with the full participation of His Fatherly love. Nor is the Holy Spirit excluded from the centrality of the cross. For it is exactly at the moment of Christ's death that He breathes out the Spirit from the cross itself. And so, through the course of these meditations, we have progressed from seeing the crucifixion of Jesus pragmatically: as a means to an end... Now can see it ontologically: as the very life and breath of the Trinity Himself. For only this all-encompassing view of the cross can do justice to the Apostle's sweeping statement: *"I am determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified."* In times past we might have questioned Paul's judgment and asked:
Do you mean that you do not want to know about good works?
Do you not want to speak about Christian living?
Do you really mean to ignore all the sickness and pain in the world?
What about all the other Scriptural teachings?
Marriage? stewardship? child-rearing? prayer? end-times? sacraments?
But now that we have begun seeing even the sublime article of the Holy Trinity manifested nowhere more clearly than in the crucifixion itself. How can we not also know that every possible aspect of humanly and creaturely existence is addressed nowhere more clearly than in Jesus' crucifixion. So, it is not as though St. Paul were choosing to speak only of the cross as though limiting his proclamation to only one of the Christian doctrines.

Rather, Paul knows that ALL of Christian faith and life is addressed when we speak of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That is the reason why it is so fitting to have Christ crucified portrayed before us in every way possible: in our ears, and nostrils, eyes, mouths and hands. Now, tonight, there is another lesson. For Paul's determination to know nothing but Jesus Christ crucified is not the judgment of only one apostle — nor of all twelve for that matter. Rather, it is God's own determination as well! And God does not deal with you by apostolic words alone. He also deals with you by the events that you suffer which shape your life. What that means is this: You should expect that God's workings in your life will also follow a cruciform pattern. For, like Paul, God is determined to know nothing among you save Jesus crucified. And it is for this reason that Peter reminds you tonight, *"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: 13 But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy."* Knowing what we now know about the glory of the cross, we can also now appreciate these cross events—these fiery trials—for the blessings they are. According to the old man and our old way of understanding life, these trials and tribulations were annoyances at best and serious setbacks at worst. They were to be avoided or gotten around. Passed through as quickly as possible with eyes closed and breath held. But now, in Christ, we see them differently. *"Blessed are you."* He says. For in these crosses and by these crosses God is being revealed to you. And He is not being revealed to you as the wrathful, vindictive God that you once thought you knew. He is being revealed to you in Christ Jesus as the Son who pours out His life for you and the Father who willingly gives His most precious possession to and for you. In these situations, the imprint of the cross is no longer confined to an image on canvass or carved in wood or metal. Rather, it is being impressed upon your very body itself. The very character of the Son of God and of the Trinity Himself is given you here. Therefore, we no longer pray that these trials might end as soon as possible. But rather, that through them we may better know Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is no longer a matter of numbing our pain with the narcotics of a feel-goodism. But a matter of rejoicing to partake of Christ's sufferings. No longer do we hold our breath and shut our eyes hoping for it to be over. But we open our eyes and drink in Christ's suffering and death. Like a swimmer—starving for oxygen at the bottom of the sea—you are invited to open your mouth and breath deeply. And what you find, is that rather than drowning by doing so, your starving lungs are filled with life and breath—the very breathing of the Holy Spirit. In this way, you know day-by-day the truth of the hymn: *Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure By the cross are sanctified; Peace is there that knows no measure, Joys that through all time abide. AMEN.*