

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

“Confession has two parts,” we say in the catechism. Of course, that is talking about confessing our sins and receiving absolution, that is forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself. Certainly when it comes to our sins, we confess them; we repeat back to God what He says about our sinful condition. Confessing the truth about Jesus also is about repeating back to God what the Scripture says about Him. That also has two parts, if you will: who He is, and what He did. Last week we heard Peter confess the first part of our confession: Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Today we hear Jesus tell us the second part of what we say back to God. Jesus tells us what He is about to do.

Now, thus far in Matthew's gospel, there have been only a couple hints of Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection. Jesus talked about binding the strong man and plundering his house (Matt. 12:29) — speaking of His defeat of Satan; and He told the scribes and Pharisees of the sign of Jonah (Matt. 12:40) — that's a reference to His three-day sleep in the death and His resurrection; certainly nothing explicit ... until now. In today's Gospel, Jesus told the disciples straight up. He *“began to show”* them, Matthew says, *“that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”*

And what Jesus foretold in His prophetic role, He accomplished in His priestly role. This, too, is what you and I confess regularly in the Nicene Creed. Having just confessed “one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,” eternal, true God with the Father, consubstantial with Him, “by whom all things were made,” God come in the flesh of the Virgin Mary in order to save us — that's the “who Jesus is” part — we continued by confessing that Jesus “was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And the third day He rose again from the dead” — that's the “what Jesus did” part.

And this part of our confession, St. Paul says, is first importance teaching: *“I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures”* (1 Cor. 15:3-4). It is of first importance; don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Don't let a person say: “I've heard all that before,” as if, having heard this good news, we can now relegate it to the bench. No! We do not major in the minors at church. We're in the majors, and we're playing with the starting lineup; we preach, teach, and confess the main thing!

Of course, trying to bench these difficult words of Jesus — and of St. Paul — is quite natural. In fact, Peter did the same thing. He objected immediately: *“Have mercy on you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”*

I wonder if Peter even heard Jesus finish His words. I wonder if he listened to Jesus say what the consummating act would be: *“and on the third day be raised,”* so firm was Peter's conviction that the Christ just shouldn't be talking about suffering and cross. That's not appropriate for God's anointed. It should be comfort and not suffering, Peter thought, praise and not scorn, glory and not cross. But this is man's way of thinking, not God's. This is our way of thinking, not His. Repent!

Thus Peter is put to shame as are all who try to divert Jesus from His objective to redeem mankind by His blood, to save mankind by His cross, to justify mankind by His grace as He laid down His life for the world. *“Get behind me, Satan!”* Jesus rebuked Peter. *“You are a hindrance to me.”* *“You are a σκάνδαλον, Peter, an offense, for the love of God requires me to go to the cross. It requires that I be lifted up unto death for your sins.”*

It was necessary, but not for Jesus' sake. It was for “us men and for our salvation.” All this was necessary for the ultimate good of mankind, for by suffering and death comes our redemption, by these comes forgiveness of our sins, by these we have life. To be sure, what those elders and chief priests and scribes intended was evil — to put to death an innocent man by suffering and cross. But it is God's way to take what was intended for evil and use it for our good: to atone for the sins of the world.

It is God's way to use what many consider foolish and weak, namely the preaching of the cross, to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21). Therefore, let not this preaching become an offense to us; let us not close our ears to what Jesus says is necessary; let us listen all the way to the end, for after *“be killed”* comes *“and on the third day be raised.”* Thus we confess it in our creeds, not only that Jesus “was crucified ... for us ..., suffered and was buried,” but also that “the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven,” and so forth.

The true Christian confession, therefore, is not just that Jesus is Lord, but that God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9), that is, Jesus died and rose again, *“delivered up for **our** trespasses and raised for **our** justification”* (Rom. 4:25). Even more than that, *we believe that [since] Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep”* (1 Thess. 4:14), that is, that we who die with faith, having been baptized, we who lose our lives in Jesus the crucified, having been buried with Him in baptism and raised up again to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4), we will rise in glory to eternal life in a kingdom that has no end.

What a wondrous thing this is, this “‘new birth,’ through which we, being freed from the devil's tyranny and loosed from sin, death, and hell, and become children of life, heirs of all God's possessions, God's own children, and brothers and sisters of

Christ,” as Luther put it (Baptismal Booklet, 8). But that also means that we have been burdened “with a mighty, lifelong enemy” (Baptismal Booklet, 3), and that means that the life of a Christian is not just marked with the sign of the cross on your mind and heart, but our lives are to be marked with self-denial and taking up our cross, and, in this way, following Jesus.

Of course, this call to live a life of Christian humility, of denying ourselves, can be a difficult thing in this hedonistic world that encourages us to indulge ourselves with every pleasure — the recent fall of an evangelical leader is another example of how easily we give in to our spiritual enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh.

Moreover, Jesus tells us that in this world we should expect crosses if we confess Him. We should expect trial and tribulation, persecution and cross. And it isn't getting any easier. Just ask the Little Sisters of the Poor, a Colorado baker, a Washington florist, a New Mexico photographer, a Kentucky printer, a Virginia teacher, a Milwaukee Lutheran High School, all under assault for wanting to live as Christ calls them to live. Powerful people with lots of money are pledging to destroy evil Christians for their so-called hate.

Nevertheless, Jesus says, “*Blessed are you,*” and “*rejoice and be glad*” (Matt. 5:11-12) for this persecution, for we are saved not by gaining the favor of the world, but by losing our life for His sake. And, in this way, indeed, we are being counted as sons and heirs (Heb. 12:7), our faith tested as by fire and shown to be genuine, a faith that expresses itself in love and godliness, in showing honor and service to others, in hope and patience and prayer.

Fearlessly, Christians go forth in love and service of our neighbor, knowing that we will be despised for it, for the name we bear, for the confession of Jesus. We do it in spite of the fact that we were going to experience trial and cross. We are compelled to do it, as St. Paul says it: “*For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised*” (2 Cor. 5:14-15) — now there is losing your life for the sake of Christ.

And it's not that we choose our crosses. We don't go forth looking especially for persecution or, like the monks of old, thinking that by our self-chosen denials we are more virtuous in our following Jesus. No! But neither do we avoid crosses when they come our way. Indeed, the holy author reminds us that we are “*trained by [such crosses]*” (Heb. 12:11). St. Paul tells us similarly, that we Christians “*rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not*

put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:3-5).

So let us heed Jesus' word: He is the Christ who suffered cross and death for our salvation. Let us confess it boldly and rejoice in our salvation. And let us take up the crosses that come our way as we follow Jesus and rejoice also in them. And when the Son of Man comes in His glory with His angels at His side, He will gather us to His throne and speak the words of His testament: "*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you...*" (Matt. 25:34).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.