

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus leaves no question about why He came. He came to die. He came *“to give his life as a ransom for many,”* as our Gospel has it. Indeed, Jesus is making His way to Jerusalem in our Gospel to do just that. And as Jesus is treading toward Calvary, so are we as we enter Passiontide. We are walking with Jesus to Calvary’s holy mountain to gaze with shock and awe at what our redemption would cost the Son of Man, but where we guilty sinners know we find the remission of our sins, where we who are troubled by our iniquities find peace in Christ’s blood shed, where we who thirst for righteousness find it flowing from His pierced side — the living water that quenches our thirst eternally.

Jesus leaves no question about what was going to happen in the days ahead. Of course, from the beginning of His ministry Jesus had been giving all sorts of hints as He taught the disciples, as we’ve heard in the last couple weeks: *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”* (John 2:19); and *“as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up”* (John 3:14). But as His hour drew near, Jesus became more explicit. In fact, He had taught the disciples in Gentile territory that *“the Son of Man must suffer... and be rejected ... and be killed, and after three days rise again”* (Mark 8:31). Returning to the region of Galilee, Jesus told the disciples again that the *“Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And ... after three days he will rise”* (Mark 9:31).

And, to be sure, Jesus provided some of the details of His passion and death and resurrection in those previous two accounts — the necessity of it, for example, but in our Gospel text today, Jesus lays it out for the disciples in great detail. The *“Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes”* — exactly as happened in the Garden on the night of Jesus’ betrayal. *“Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders,”* and Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss (Mark 14:43)

Those Jewish leaders proceeded to hold a kangaroo court, and in the end, as Jesus said, they *“condemn[ed] him to death and deliver[ed] him over to the Gentiles.”* Mark reports thus, *“they all condemned him as deserving death”* (Mark 14:64), *“And they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate”* (Mark 15:1), the Roman, Gentile, governor.

Jesus told the disciples that these Gentiles would *“mock him and spit on him, and flog him,”* and again Mark records it: Pilate first had Jesus scourged; then taking their cue from Pilate, the Roman soldiers mocked Him and struck Him and

spat on Him (Mark 15:17-20). And then “*they led him out to crucify him*” (Mark 15:20), that is, to “*kill him.*”

To Calvary, the place of the Skull, Jesus went to be lifted up on a cross. There Jesus entered His glory, not flanked by James and John, “*one at [His] right hand and one at [His] left,*” but “*two robbers*” were crucified with Him (Mark 15:27). For although James would die at Herod Agrippa’s sword (Acts 12:1-2), and John would suffer persecution and exile, they truly did not know what they asked of Jesus.

They could not truly drink the cup of wrath that the Father had given Jesus to drink for sinful man; only Jesus could drink that cup to the dregs. James’ martyrdom and John’s tribulations for the sake of Christ could not atone for a single life, not even their own; only Jesus could be baptized with a baptism of blood that could cleanse the world of its sins.

Only Jesus could serve the multitudes in this way, as the perfect sacrifice, the “*lamb without blemish or spot*” (1 Pet. 1:19), the perfect substitute, offering up His life unto death, the Son of Man substituting for all the sons of mankind: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28), the Son of man giving His life as a sacrifice of atonement that covers all our sins and brings peace with God.

Had Jesus come to be served, our lives would be an endless striving after a perfection that we can never achieve. How depressing! How despairing! But thanks be to God, He sent Jesus into our flesh, to live His life in perfect obedience to the law in our place, to offer up His life as a perfect sacrifice for our sin, and then to rise again an imperishable, immortal life that is the first fruits of our own life eternal. So, Jesus always told the disciples that “*after three days he [would] rise*” from the dead. How important that is for us also as we enter Passiontide, but how important that is for us as we now live as Christ’s disciples and sons of God!

For we are similarly called to service in the model of Christ — not lording anything over others, not lazy slobs waiting for others to serve us. We are called to serve — not as those who think God will reward them for it, but simply because we have first been loved in Christ Jesus and served by Him.

“Serve” is what Christians are to do, not that we can “give our lives” for anyone else as Jesus did for the world, but we are called to present our bodies as living sacrifices, “*holy and acceptable to God,*” using our gifts “*according to the grace given to us,*” as St. Paul says. “*If prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness*” (Rom. 12:1, 6-8). Again, St. Paul teaches, “*Bear one another’s burdens,*” and again, “*let us do good to*

everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:2, 10).
— all based upon what Christ has done for us, in service to us.

With all this in mind, it’s hard to understand the vitriol that is spewed toward Christians by our nation’s cultural elites. Of course, with the shooting in Atlanta this past week and the shooter’s connections with a conservative, Southern Baptist church, it gives them another opportunity to malign conservative Christians and accuse them of being the real culprits behind the shooter’s madness. Christian teachings on sexual morality are simply too repressive, the world accuses us. With the Psalmist in our Introit, we cry out: *“Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people, from the deceitful and unjust man deliver me!”*

Some of the accusations even come from within. The church “bears much responsibility for causing and upholding those systemic inequalities and biases” of race, class, gender and sexuality, an ordained minister and assistant professor in the religion department at Florida State University is quoted as saying in an Atlanta Journal-Constitution article (Shelia Poole, “After spa shootings, faith leaders grapple with deep questions,” The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, March 19, 2021). Christian doctrine is hate-filled, they charge us, and Christians who believe it are haters.

Of course, they are wrong. You heard it. True Christian doctrine surely condemns sin, but this is not based in hate; and God’s remedy for sin in Christ is not hateful. Moreover, true believers in Christ are not haters. We are called to love God and love our neighbor — even more to *“love [our] enemies, [and] do good to those who hate [us]”* (Luke 6:27).

I have no idea what this shooter had been taught in his Southern Baptist church. He seems to have been taught something of grace, for he is reported to have told a former roommate, “I’m falling out of God’s grace.” But that sounds more like he was trying to make himself worthy of God’s grace. But we know that God’s grace is not dependent upon our efforts, *“otherwise,”* St. Paul says, *“grace would no longer be grace”* (Rom. 11:6). Rather, God’s grace is gift; it’s manifest in Him who came to die for us, in Him who came to serve and give His life for us, in Him who calls us to repent and who forgives us our sins, in Him who calls us to serve others and not self. This message was either missing or didn’t get through to this shooter, and so also, it seems to me, the comforting and hopeful message of Him who not only was handed over, mistreated, and killed, but especially who rose again after three days for us.

This is the message that the Church proclaims, and this message makes all the difference in the world.

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