

The last two weeks of Lent are called Passiontide, which means suffering-time. This little two-week season begins today. From now until Good Friday our meditation on the Word of God is largely a meditation on the sufferings of Christ. In the Gospel reading for today we heard Jesus suffering slander. Since we picked up partway through John 8, you might wonder, “What did Jesus say that got the people so upset?” He had told them, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Oh, the horror! Jesus preached to them the power of His Word. He preached to them His desire and ability to free them from sin and death. And how did they respond? They were offended that anyone would consider them slaves. They were offended that anyone would say, “You must be something other than what you are now. You must change your ways.”

Jesus speaks the truth, and He speaks it for the good of man. Therefore Jesus says elsewhere, “Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me” (Mt. 11:6, Lk. 7:23). Jesus will tell you the truth about yourself, and it might hurt, but it is the truth, and the truth ultimately does not hurt, but saves. I preached about this on the second Sunday in Lent. Jesus called the Canaanite woman a dog, just like Jesus calls us poor, miserable sinners. The best course is that which the woman took: to agree with Jesus and

understand that he calls us those things so that He might save us. The woman said, “True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table” (Mt. 15:27). Likewise the Jews in the reading should have said, “True, Lord; we are household slaves and You are the Son. Yet if the Son makes us free, we will be free indeed.” But instead they stiffened their necks and hardened their hearts and took offense at the truth.

We see such hardness of heart all around us, and it should lead us to pray, “Dear Lord, let this never happen to me. May I never harden myself against Your Word. Soften my heart with the hammer of Your Law. Show me for what I am, that I may not become delusional and suppose that I do not need You. Make me to know the truth of these words, ‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us’ (1 Jn. 1:8). And that I may not become despondent or be tempted to stiffen my neck against You, make me to know also the truth of the words that follow, ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.’ Be faithful and just, and forgive, O Lord, and give me always more satisfaction in Your righteousness than in my own.”

Yet many are offended at the truth. When Jesus tells them what they are, it hurts, but instead of seeking a remedy, they prefer to turn a blind eye to the problem. It would be like if a doctor brought someone a cancer

diagnosis and proposed a course of treatment, and instead of heeding the doctor's words, the patient killed the doctor and tried to forget he had ever heard the word "cancer." It is similarly foolish when men treat Jesus with contempt.

Jesus tries to reason with them. He shows His kindness. He shows that He has not sinned against them, but instead seeks their welfare. The reading began with the question: "Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me?" Yet the Jews respond by saying, "Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?" They attack Jesus' character and they attack Jesus' doctrine. First they claim that He Himself is a God-forsaken half-breed, for that is how the Jews regarded the Samaritans. Significantly, Jesus does not respond to this personal attack, and this teaches us both what to expect from the world because we are Christians and how we should regard the world's insults.

The truth of Jesus' words seems obvious to us, and it should seem obvious to the world as well. Yet you may have met at least one person, if not many people, who scoff at Christianity and think it is stupid and think you are stupid for believing it. Through such attacks the devil seeks to shake our faith and make us doubt the truth. But instead of being shaken, we should simply recognize that what happened to Jesus is happening to

us. People feel threatened by the truth of God's Word, and they react fiercely against it. That reaction might say something about the foolishness of man, but it does not negate the truthfulness of God. And therefore we can brush off personal attacks that come to us because of the Word. Jesus teaches us to see things rightly. He Himself is God and is always right and true, and yet men treated Him with contempt. But their insult to His character did not change who He was, and so also men's insults do not change what we are either. Such insults are powerless. Indeed, we should see such insults as a confirmation of the Word of Jesus, not a challenge to it, for Jesus has said, "Blessed are you when they revile you and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt. 5:11-12).

When it comes to personal attacks, we can simply ignore them, for we know the truth. What the world thinks we are and what we actually are are not even close to being the same thing, as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6, "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:8-10).

So when the Jews call Jesus a Samaritan, He pays them no regard. He knows it is not true, and as He says, He does not seek His own glory. But when they say that Jesus has a demon and thus call His doctrine devilish, Jesus does respond to that: "I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me." Jesus will suffer personal attack, but He will not ignore an attack on the Word of God. People can think little of Him. If they will heed sound doctrine, they will be saved and will learn to think of Him rightly. But if they will not heed sound doctrine, it does not matter whether they think of Him as a righteous man or a scoundrel: without sound doctrine, they will never be saved and will never come to the knowledge of the truth. So Jesus digs in His heels. He acts stubbornly, not to defend His own honor, but to defend sound doctrine. And He gives the reason by showing what is at stake: "Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death." That is why sound doctrine is so important. The pure Word of Jesus saves us from death. Jesus so tenaciously defends sound doctrine because He wants his hearers to live and not die.

Just as we overlook personal insult like Jesus did, so also we uphold sound doctrine like Jesus did. The world might hate us all the more for it, as the Jews in the reading only became more angry at Jesus and sought to stone Him to death. But how else will hearts turn and believe if not by the

Word of Jesus? My reputation is not going to save someone from death such that I should forcefully defend it. Let men think what they want about me. Who I am in their eyes will not determine whether they live or die. But Jesus says, “If anyone keeps My word he shall never see death.” The Word is worth defending. The world expects that we will defend ourselves against insult and keep silent about the Word, but it is exactly the opposite. We will keep silent about ourselves and defend the Word, not because we are opinionated or annoying, like the world thinks we are, but because we actually desire the world to be saved, and that is only going to happen through the Word of Jesus.

Think about the significance of what Jesus says about His Word. “If anyone keeps My word he shall never see death.” Jesus says the same thing elsewhere: “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (Jn. 5:24). And again, “Whoever lives and believes in Me will never die” (Jn. 11:26). And again, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life” (Jn. 6:47). And those are just verses from John’s Gospel. The Bible is full of many other passages teaching that faith in Jesus’ Word grants eternal life, not merely as a future gift, but as a present reality.

The Word of Jesus says very clearly that we who keep His Word will not taste death. Instead we hear in Hebrews that Jesus was “crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). What a good and gracious Lord! Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end (Jn. 13:1). He loved us unto death, taking sin and its wages, tasting death for us that we might never taste it.

But pastor, don't we die? It is true that earthly life comes to an end. Yet Jesus teaches us how to speak about Christian death rightly. When He looks at the corpse of Jairus' daughter, Jesus says, “The girl is not dead but sleeping” (Mt. 9:24, Mk. 5:29, Lk. 8:52). When Lazarus died, Jesus said, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up” (Jn. 11:11). When we are in the process of dying it seems that we are going to see death. It seems that we are going down. We speak of someone's life or health declining. Yet at that very moment when lungs stop breathing and heart stops beating, we do not find ourselves crashing down, but soaring up. Right when we thought we were going to taste and see death we instead taste and see that the Lord is good. The Lord's angels bear us up to heaven and we see the Lord. If even in that very moment when the taste of death appears inescapable we do not taste death, how much less shall we taste

death throughout the rest of our lives? This is the power of Jesus' Word: it gives complete security, removes all fear, grants peace of heart and mind, imparts boldness against all adversity, makes us steadfast to bear all things with gladness, and kindles in us an unquenchable joy. "If anyone keeps My word he will never taste death."

So you see why Jesus teaches us to shrug off insults and yet uphold His Word. His Word makes all the difference between children of God and children of the devil. The children of the devil might seem strong and daunting, but they do not listen to the Word of Jesus, and therefore even now they are seeing and tasting and teaching nothing but death, just as even now the children of God enjoy eternal life. This stirs us up to two things.

First, we pray against the children of the devil. We pray not just against public false teachers, but against everyone who teaches others to devalue the Word of Jesus and pursue other things. We pray against those who seek to make laws that are contrary to the Law of God, we pray against false prophets in the Church who teach a righteousness that is not from Jesus, we pray against parents who raise their children to seek money and pleasure and scoff at the Gospel. We pray that God would break and hinder their evil plans and purposes. We pray from the psalms, "Break their teeth in



their mouth, O God! Break out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord!” (Ps. 58:6). We pray this first of all because what the wicked say is not right. God gave man his tongue, and everything man’s tongue says should be in conformity with the Word of the Maker of tongues. The fact that man speaks wrongly is reason enough to pray that such wrong speech stop. But we also pray this because of the harm it does. Scoffers and wicked men lead others astray, put stumbling blocks in their way, and are a temptation even to the saints. Make it cease, O Lord! “May the Lord cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaks proud things” (Ps. 12:3).

But the wickedness of the devil’s children stirs us up to something else as well, especially as we reflect on what we have in Christ. When we see the world raging and groping along in the dark, we are stirred to pity. Why would we fear such people? They are pitiable. The world is a blind man who thinks he can see: he stumbles along and talks like he is aware of everything around him, and yet as we watch, he keeps hurting himself. He announces some grand plan based on what he perceives, and we know he perceives all wrong and that his plan will harm him. He goes on in confidence, walking into walls and tripping over rocks until he is cut and bruised and bloody. And then he claims that he meant to do that and enjoys it, and we know he is lying to himself and we pity him, and we pity him even

more when he seems to actually believe that he enjoys his blindness and pain. What is life like to ask and not receive, to seek and not to find, to knock and the door never to open? Most of us have long forgotten that sort of life, if we ever knew it. It is a miserable life!

So not only do we pray against the devil's children, that God would keep them from blaspheming Christ and hurting their fellow men. We also pray for them, as Jesus Himself teaches, "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you" (Mt. 5:44). We pray for them, and we are also not afraid to speak. Whom would you trust to tell you what the world looks like: the man who can see, or the man who is blind? Dear saints, you are those who can see. You know the truth and the truth has set you free. You need not fear the world. What did the world accomplish in its rage against Jesus? It only accomplished His will. He came to Jerusalem for one purpose, and that was to die on the cross for the redemption of the world, and the Jews in the reading were unwitting helpers toward that goal. They could not even see that they were aiding Christ, not hindering Him.

Therefore we pray, "Dear Father, enlighten those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death. Turn their hearts to know You, that they may rejoice in the fold of Your Church instead of awaiting the outer darkness

where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Grant that I not be shaken by their words, but that I help them with Yours. Give me confidence, for I know whom I have believed, Him whose Word has granted me eternal life.”

It is Passiontide. Let us be glad, for Christ Jesus has come into the world to save sinners and to speak the Word of life. In His holy name.

Amen.