

Good Friday

10 April 2009

Saint Mark's, Tampa

✠ I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Hebrews were discouraged. Their spiritual struggle was wearing them out. Their Christian walk was getting to be too much for them. Their shoulders were slumping and their knees were buckling. And the thought of having to get everything right – to undo all the wrong roads taken and all the false choices made – just to get back to square one – it's too much.

Maybe *you're* discouraged. The Lenten discipline that was a blessing for a week or so after Ash Wednesday became a chore by the third week; by the fifth week you had dropped it altogether, and the shame and frustration of that failure is – not even maddening. You don't have the energy to be mad about it. It's just exhausting. Your shoulders are slumping and your knees are buckling, and you think, I don't have the energy to undo all the wrong roads taken and all the false choices made, just to get back to square one.

But to those who are discouraged, the writer to the Hebrews says, "Let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and grace to help in time of need." How can we be bold in approaching the throne of grace when we're discouraged? How, especially, can we be bold on this day of all days, when we face up to the terrible consequences of our sin, when the Church asks us to shout "Crucify him!" so that we are forced to acknowledge our part in the death of Jesus?

There is a strand of thinking out there – one could hardly call it Christian, though it has seduced some who profess the name of Christ – that says that sin is nothing more than our failure to realize that we are already one with God. So we can be bold because there is something about us, something divine and perfect, to which we merely have to open our eyes.

The writer to the Hebrews could not be further from this line of thinking. He does not encourage us to be bold because of anything about *us*; no, we are to be bold because of something about *Jesus*: "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness."

It was the job of the high priest to offer sacrifice for sin. But the animal sacrifices in the Temple were only a token of what God really wants from us. The Psalmist wrote:

In sacrifice and sin-offering you take no pleasure
(you have given me ears to hear you);
Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required.

But if God takes no pleasure in the sacrifices of grain and animals, in what kind of sacrifice does he take pleasure? Not in the involuntary sacrifice of a witless and passive animal, but in a voluntary sacrifice of perfect obedience, undertaken freely and actively. That is why the Psalmist continues: "I have come to do your will." Elsewhere in the Letter to the Hebrews the writer says that this is what Christ says when he comes into the world: "I have come to do your will." Christ comes into the world in order to do the will of the Father, and the Father's will is for Christ to make the perfect sacrifice, once for all.

And what does he offer in this perfect sacrifice? He offers himself: his body, his blood, his life. He is himself the victim. He was the only victim whose sacrifice could be perfectly acceptable to God, because he alone could offer perfect obedience; and among all the mortal things of this world, his life alone was infinitely precious.

So he is the perfect victim. But because he offers himself, he is also the perfect priest. It is the job of the priest to offer sacrifice. But if the sacrifice is a sacrifice of obedience, only the victim can offer it. So the perfect victim must also be a priest, a perfect priest, whose self-sacrifice is therefore perfectly acceptable to God.

Jesus, the great High Priest, has offered the true sacrifice for sin. And because it is perfectly acceptable, our High Priest has "passed through the heavens." He does not go in and out of the divine presence, as the priests of the Old Covenant did, but is always at the Father's side, "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

And that is why we can be bold in approaching the throne of grace, on this day of all days, when we face up to the terrible consequences of our sin, when the Church asks us to shout "Crucify him!" so that we are forced to acknowledge our part in the death of Jesus. We can be bold because our High Priest gladly undertook the only sacrifice that could reconcile us to God, and by his own perfect obedience won a perfect and final victory over every sin and shortcoming and discouragement and weakness that we have ever known.

So yes, perhaps our spiritual struggle is wearing us out. Our shoulders are slumping and our knees buckling and the thought of how our Lenten disciplines have failed is too much to bear. But what do we need to do to put that right? What heroic effort do we need to make, what striking act of obedience do we need to perform, in order to undo all the wrong roads taken and all the false choices made, just to get back to square one?

There is no effort, no act of obedience. We don't have to do anything. Our access to God is free and unfettered. We have the right to follow where Jesus has gone before. Our right to approach God does not come and go; it doesn't have an expiration date and there are no requirements for renewing our licenses or getting continuing education credits.

And we never have to start from square one: we can go straight to throne of grace, because that's where our High Priest is. We always have the right to approach the throne of grace with boldness, because that right has been won for us, once for all, by the blood of Jesus.

This boldness, remember, is not because of anything we have done or ever could do. It is because of what Jesus has done, perfectly, once for all. So it is fitting for us on this day to turn our attention to the mighty acts by which the right to have such confidence was won for us. Let us consider the magnitude of the sacrifice, the perfect willingness of the victim, the unstinting love of the priest. But not only that: let us also remember the *purpose* of this sacrifice:

he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

And let us claim, again and again, the free and unfettered access to the throne of grace that has been won for us by Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*