

## His Spirit and His Sufferings

**I - I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe ...**

*I believe that I cannot believe.* That is, in short, what we learn from our Catechism tonight, because it is what Holy Scripture teaches. *I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.* The holy Apostle Paul writes it: *Natural Man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them. For, as he also writes it: The intent of the flesh, of sinful nature, that is, is hostility toward God, for it does not submit to the Law of God; indeed, it cannot!*

This is what Holy Scripture teaches about us sinners, who we are, and what we can and cannot do with regards to God. We cannot bring ourselves to believe in God, and to love Him. We cannot, for we will not, and cannot will it, for sin in us will not allow it.

This is also our experience. Well, it might not be for all of us. In some ways, the experience of many believers is that we do choose to believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord, and come to Him. Our experience is that to believe in our Lord Jesus and come to Him is something we choose, and have to choose, constantly, against the testimony of the world around us.

And to come to Church to meet Him and receive salvation from Him in His Word and worship, that is our choice, also, in a way, even though He does demand it of us, and therefore some occasionally choose not to, and some choose not to rather often, until the flesh prevails, which does not submit to the Law of God, and it becomes their choice not to come to Him at all, and not to receive salvation from Him in His Word and worship; so they forget who they themselves are, and who our Lord Jesus is, and come to believe in something other than Him, and they come to believe that to believe in whatever else it is that they believe in *is* to believe in our Lord Jesus, for they want to be Christian, even though they no longer know what it is, and no longer care to come to Christ and have Him come to them in His Word and worship to give Himself to them, and His salvation.

The experience of others is that it is their own choice not only to believe in Him, but also to *love* Him. For they have learnt from false preaching and teaching that it has to be, from preaching and teaching that you have to commit yourself to believing in Jesus, and work on yourself to *really* love Him, because you have to be saved.

And some might have learnt this from their own hearts, even though it was the *Gospel* that was preached to them, in its truth and purity, the Word of God of His salvation; for *natural Man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; and the intent of the flesh, of sinful nature, that is, is hostility toward God, for it does not submit to the Law of God; indeed, it cannot!*

And thinking that they have to make themselves believe in Jesus, and love Him, to be saved, they struggle to convince themselves that they have, and do. They ignore all indications in their lives and in their minds that they really do not, that their love for Jesus falls pathetically short, and their faith is not really faith *in Him*, but rather an evil and ungodly and idolatrous obsession with themselves and their own goodness and godliness.

It is a bit like Peter; as we hear it tonight, he had assured our Lord Jesus that *though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away! And: even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!* We all know, I think, what became of that. Our Lord Jesus already knew, of course, for He is God and knows all things, and knows, also, what is in the heart of Man. *Truly, I tell you, He said to Peter, as we hear it tonight, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.* And even before that, even as we hear it tonight, it would become evident just how profound it was, the love Peter had for our Lord Jesus. He would die for Him, he said; but to stay awake with Him in His most difficult hour so far, that was just too much; it was too real.

For those who have eyes to see, and have the courage to be honest to themselves, and honest to God, it will always be obvious that we do not love our Lord Jesus with our whole heart; that we do not love our neighbour as ourselves, as we would, if we really loved Him, because we know very well that that is what He commands.

And as for the shallow, who are capable of ignoring the testimony of their own lives, and that of their hearts and minds, well, they should learn it from the Word of God, and acknowledge it, that *if we say we have no sin, as the holy Apostle John writes it, we deceive ourselves.*

*That which is born of the flesh is flesh,* says our Lord Jesus, that is: that which is born of sinful nature is itself sinful. Not only is it insufficient, it is ungodliness and evil. The love we work in ourselves fall short of what we owe to Him. The faith we work in ourselves is not faith in Him, but rather in ourselves; our assurance that it is not, is denial of the *Gospel*, His Word of salvation, and of what His salvation is.

*If we say we have no sin, as the holy Apostle John writes it, we deceive ourselves, and the Truth is not in us.*

What we heard tonight from Holy Scripture presents our Lord to us as not only the one who has fulfilled all righteousness for us, for our salvation, but also as the one who *fulfils* our salvation for us, and in us. Not only did He give Himself up to suffer for sinners, with the words: *Since it is I that you seek, let these go!, but it also happened to fulfil the word He had spoken to the Father earlier that night: Of those whom you gave to me I have lost none.*

Those He will save, of whom He will lose none, are those whom the Father has given to Him. And He Himself is the one who will not lose us, and will make sure that we are not lost to His love. As He has said it, as the Gospel according to Saint John recalls it: *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And: All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will by no means cast out. For this is my Father's will, that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life.* In other words, when we come to Him, it is because the Father has already given us to Him, and draws us to Him, in order that His will may be brought to completion, and His will is our salvation. Otherwise we would have nothing to do with Him, not as He really is. We would have nothing to do with His salvation, as He teaches it in Holy Scripture, that He alone is our Saviour, and only in what He has done is salvation for us to find, and not in any way in anything we ourselves do, not in our decision to believe in Him, nor in our love for Him. But when we seek our salvation in Him, in His Word of His love and what His love has done for us, then it is God Himself who has worked it in us, because He wills our salvation, and will Himself bring it to completion for us.

What we hear tonight sets our Lord Jesus before us as the one who has brought all things to completion for us, out of His love for us, which is the greatest love of all, at the most terrible cost to Himself. *Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given to me?*, we hear that He said. And the cup the Father had given to Him to drink, and which He took from the Father's hand, is the cup of the righteous wrath of God against our ungodliness and unbelief, the judgement of His goodness against evil, eternal death and damnation in His holy hatred against sin and Satan in us, such sufferings that the very thought of what lay before Him made Him to sweat drops of blood and plead that this cup be taken away from Him, if it could be. And still He would bear it. Such is the love the Son has for the Father. Such is the love that is in God forever, between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And such is His love *for us*, who is the Son of God and God Himself from eternity, His love for us sinners, whose evil and ungodliness at heart is so profound that we cannot even believe in Him, and will not, and cannot will it, and will not receive salvation from Him, out of His goodness and grace alone, unless He Himself makes us to will it. He has borne for us the judgement of His own goodness against our evil and ungodliness, so that *there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it, because He has Himself borne all judgement for us. This is the Gospel, and it is the greatest love of all.

Holy Scripture also sets before us, however, that He has fulfilled not only the *punishment* of the Law for us, but also its *demands*. He has not only *died* for us - as if one could say *only* about that, except that I know of no other way to say this - He has also lived for us the life that we owe it to God to live, in full and complete love for Him, and trust, and submission to His will. He has fulfilled all righteousness; and it is His perfect righteousness He gives to us; it is into His perfect righteousness He has had us baptised and born anew. He has fulfilled for us also this demand of the Law of God that *we have no other gods*, that is: that *we should fear, love and trust in God above all things*, as our Catechism says it. He has fulfilled it, because we cannot.

As the holy Apostle Peter writes it, and as we shall observe it in the weeks to come, *when He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to Him who judges justly*. All that He did for us, in other words, He did *in faith*, trusting in God to make all things well; as the Law of God demands it of us that *we fear, love and trust in God above all things*, and *in all things*, so as to surrender ourselves to Him and trust in Him to make all things well, also in those situations when it seems that absolutely nothing good can come of this, and nothing could ever make this right, and nothing could ever make this well.

This is the comfort Holy Scripture sets before us, when we find our faith failing: He has fulfilled the Law for us, in our stead and on our behalf, so that it *is* fulfilled for us, and there is nothing lacking, not before His judgement. He has had faith for us; and He gives His own faith to us, and has it count as our righteousness before Him.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. *Amen*.