

His Spirit and His Sufferings

II - *The Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel ...*

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, Lutheran Christians confess. We confess this, because it is what Holy Scripture teaches; and we confess it, also, because Jesus Christ our Lord, in whom we cannot by our own reason or strength believe, and to whom we cannot come, either, by our own reason or strength, He has Himself made us to believe in Him, and to believe what He teaches in Holy Scripture, and He still does that. As we also confess it: the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gift, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.

He Himself has done this, yes, and does it, for the Holy Spirit who has done it and does it, is His own Spirit, with whom He is One from eternity, just as He is one with the Father, and these Three are one God. The Holy Spirit is His own breath and life - in both Biblical languages, the words for *breath* and the word for *Spirit* are the same, and *breath* is synonymous with *life*. And His breath is in His Word, and His love is in His life, and as such, His life is in His Word of love, and the Word of His salvation is also His *power* of salvation, and works salvation.

With His Word of life He breathes His life into us, and His love, enthroned in the glory of God as He is, as we hear it tonight that He said that He would be, once His work of salvation would be brought to completion: *From now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God!*

And this is how He brings His salvation to completion *in us*: with His Word of the salvation He has brought to completion for us in His sufferings and death. Otherwise we would not know of Him and His salvation, as we heard it tonight that the chief priests and the Council would not; as many still will not; as, again, in fact, none of us will, unless He Himself makes us to.

They did ask Him, as we hear it: *If you are the Christ, tell us*. But He who knows the heart of men, and He does, and that is why Holy Scripture teaches as it does, He said to them: *If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer!* They asked Him, but they had no interest in any answer of His. They questioned, but they had no interest in conversation.

Times change. I grew up, for as much as I have grown up, and some may question that I have, in an age in which it was fashionable to be *questioning*.

To look into things and investigate the world with an open mind was seen as an emblem of intelligence and honesty, and reasonably so, I suppose. The downside to this culture of questioning was, of course, that if you ever were to find an answer, you could no longer call yourself *questioning*. And, as is always the case with that which is fashionable, to be questioning was really more about appearances than about actually searching for answers in order to understand the truths about life.

Our age is one of *rage*. In common culture, particularly among young people and internet users, *outrage* is the most valuable of virtues. Consequently, what the Church faces today is not so much enquiry as interrogation and inquisition. Those who question the Church are usually not doing so in an attempt to appear open-minded or interested, but rather in search of occasions and opportunities to express outrage.

Times change. And in all the changes of time, things remain basically the same. As we hear it tonight, when our Lord Jesus answered the question asked by the High Priest, one of the officers standing by struck Him and said: *Is that how you answer the High Priest?* Now, most likely this soldier had but little interest, and probably even less understanding, of the theological implications of the discussion taking place before him. But anyone can express outrage, even without understanding of exactly at what it is that he is expected to be outraged, or she. Once the object of outrage is appointed, anything he or she says or does becomes an outrage in itself. Of course the Vice-President's wife can work at a Christian school - it's a free country - but to work at a Christian school so fanatical as to actually *be* a Christian school! Of course an actor can be a Christian, but to be so fanatical a Christian as to actually believe in *Christianity*! Of course one should answer the High Priest, but to actually the High Priest!

Common sense would cause one to ask oneself the question: What else is one supposed to say than what one believes to be true, or, in the case of our Lord Jesus, what He *knew* to be true?

But to a mob, common sense means as little as the truth. Even obviously untrue testimonies are taken at face value, like that of those whose testimonies did not agree, and fake news; as, as we see it these days, when claims of a hate crime are exposed as false, the outrage is not that someone lied, but that some did not immediately and unquestioningly believe their lies. *What further witnesses do we need? What evidence do we need, other than the conclusion we agreed upon already at the outset?*

But let us leave such shallowness aside. Even the enlightened and those who care about truth can have good reason to find the *Gospel* offensive.

Even though our Lord Jesus had never said that He would destroy the Temple, but rather that others would, the High Priest understood what it meant, what our Lord Jesus had said, that He would *build* the Temple; yes, for *that* He had actually said. And what it means is that our Lord Jesus is the Son of David, of whom God had said: *He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of His Kingdom forever. I will be to Him a father, and He shall be to me a Son.*

The High Priest saw this, and cut off the bumbling testimonies of obviously false witnesses and cut to the chase: *Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?*

The High Priest heard the *Gospel* in what our Lord Jesus had said, that with Him the Kingdom has come. Except, he did not hear as *Gospel*, not as the joyous Word of salvation from God; all he heard in it was *blasphemy*, that someone claimed to be the Son of God.

Would we believe it, if someone we knew would make the same claim? Absolutely not. Once again, though, we have to ask: what else could our Lord Jesus have said, being that He is, in fact, the Son of God?

The *Gospel* is indeed in itself offensive, the Word of God, of His salvation. It proclaims salvation as the forgiveness of our sin, won for us with the bitter sufferings and death of His Beloved. And with that, it assumes us to be evil and ungodly. It makes us out to be ungodly, and our ungodliness to be evil. It robs us of all illusions of goodness and godliness and godlikeness. It must be an offensive Word, or rather, it would have to be, were it not the Truth.

We can try to shake it off. We can try to ignore it. But it is always there, nagging away at us, ever accusing us. Like the servant girl who just would not leave Peter in peace, who said to him: *You also were with the Nazarene!*, and to others: *This man is one of them.* It always challenges us: *If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong.* It always confronts us with our injustice and ungodliness: *If I tell you, you will not believe, and if I ask you, you will not answer!*

Well, technically, in traditional Lutheran parlance, it would be *the Law* doing that, rather than the *Gospel*. But the Law is implicit in the *Gospel*, as we already observed it; whether or not it does that, technically speaking, in each and every actual sermon, by the very nature of the *Gospel* the Law always accompanies the *Gospel* as that which makes the *Gospel* what it is.

And the Law will not leave us alone. It nags. It will not allow us to escape.

Only by intense efforts are sinners capable of suppressing its voice in their hearts and minds. That is why unbelievers are so intent and intense about pointing out the shortcomings of the Church of Christ, and His Christians, real and imagined and invented, and turning their inner anger at God against His beloved ones, who have come to know His love, and begun to love His love.

Only by intense efforts at intensifying the evil and ungodliness of our hearts are sinners able to silence the voice of the Law in their hearts and minds. As Peter attempted, pressured by those who would not know our Lord Jesus and His love, by invoking a curse upon himself and swear that he did not know that which he knew only too well.

Not all of us are capable, however, of silencing the Word of God in our hearts and minds; by the grace of God we are not, because the love of God will not let us go; as Peter was not, because he had come to know our Lord Jesus, and had begun to know His love. Previously, he had confessed to our Lord Jesus: *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.* And our Lord Jesus had said to him: *Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but rather my Father, He who is in Heaven.*

God Himself, who is Father and Son and Holy Spirit, makes us to see the truth in His Truth, through disobedience and defiance and doubts. He does that, through the Word of our Lord Jesus and what He has done for us, as it is brought to us and born in us by His Holy Spirit, who breathes His life into us, so that we come alive from the death of disobedience and defiance.

Without His Word of love, His Law will but leave us in disobedience and defiance. The sincere among us it will leave also in despair at the severity of our sin; as it left Peter in despair, until the salvation of God was shown to him.

Our Lord Jesus had taught in the synagogues; now that He is seated again in the power of God, He teaches in His Church. He has His Church speak His promise of full forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings, and of eternal life with Him, all on account of His love and what His love has done for us. And in His Word, His love shines upon us, and shines into us, and lights up our darkness, so that we believe in Him, and we are His own, and will be, always and forever, because *the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gift, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.*

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