

## The Third Sunday of Lent

### 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

*We preach Christ crucified*, the Apostle writes, with reference to himself and the other Apostles, and also with reference to his assistants, who were also his *apprentices*, and to the apprentices of the other Apostles, who would, in due time, continue the activities of the Apostles in the Church of Christ after the Apostles had passed on; and so he writes what he writes with reference to all faithful Christian Pastors, and with reference to the Church of Christ altogether.

This is what sets the Church of Christ apart in the world; that *we preach Christ crucified*. For to the world, or, as the Apostle writes it, *to those who are perishing, the Word of the cross is foolishness*. It is also what sets the faithful Church of Christ apart from other so-called *churches*: that *we preach Christ crucified*. For also among those who call themselves Christian are there those who would rather have something else preached to them, something more in tune with the worldly wisdom of the age, or whatever else is more interesting to them.

So it was also among those who claimed to belong to the Church of Christ in Corinth, to whom the Apostle wrote what we hear today. In that church there were many who saw themselves as superior to the common Christians, to those who clung to the Word of the cross, as Christians do.

Some saw themselves as more intellectual and educated because they embraced elements of the philosophy of the ungodly world. Others saw themselves as more *spiritual* because they embraced elements of the heathen religions that were popular in that day and age. Both of these groups saw these beliefs as a *supplement* to the Christian faith, which made them Christians of a higher order, so to speak, whereas, in actuality, embracing these ungodly teachings led them to set even the most crucial teachings of Holy Scripture aside, and, in effect, deny the Christian faith as such; as the Apostle would write it later in his Letter, that *some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead!*

And obviously, by embracing beliefs contrary to the faith of the Church of Christ, they were separating themselves from the Church of Christ, only pretending to belong, and from Christ Himself, also, for equally obviously, to embrace beliefs that are contrary to what He teaches in Holy Scripture is ungodliness and unbelief to begin with.

Therefore is it that the Apostle would also write later in his letter that *you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons, and: anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself*, that is: without acknowledging that the Church is the body of Christ, which means that her faith as the Truth of God, and that as such, what she preaches and teaches and believes is actually to be believed, and taken seriously as being for real.

A Christian is not to make up his own religion by putting pieces together he comes upon here and there, and happens to like; he is not even to make up his own religion by putting the pieces of *Holy Scripture* together he personally prefers, and disregard Holy Scripture as a whole, or the Church. Being a Christian is not being on your own, not even with God; of this the Apostle reminds his readers already in the opening of his Letter, as he points out that *God is faithful, by whom you were called into the communion of His Son* that is: into our Lord Jesus Himself, who gives Himself to His Christians in the life and worship of His Church.

He reminds his readers, also, that what is truly *spiritual* is not that which is of your spirit, but rather that which is spoken by the Spirit of God, which is, well, the Word of the cross. *We have not received the spirit of the world*, he writes, *but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we speak, not in words taught by the wisdom of Man, but taught by the Holy Spirit, who compares the spiritual to the spiritual.*

And not only is the Word of the cross that which is truly *spiritual*, in that it is from the Spirit of God, it is also the only true *wisdom*, for it is Wisdom from God, whose *foolishness*, even, is *wiser than men*, as we also hear it today that the Apostle writes it.

Often Christians will wonder, and perhaps Pastors will in particular, not only how it can be that unbelievers cannot see the how wonderful it is, the Word of the cross, that freely and for nothing, out of His goodness alone, and for no other reason whatsoever, God promises and gives to all sinners full and complete forgiveness for all sin, rescue from eternal death and damnation in Hell and eternal life, instead, with Him, in the fullness of His glory, but also why even those who claim to be Christian, and perhaps are, somehow, so easily come to despise it, and turn instead to the wisdom of the world, and that which the world calls *spiritual*, and perhaps even insist outright that His Church preach *that* rather than *Christ crucified*.

It really is no wonder how this can be, though; the Apostle knows very well, and explains it later: *natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are discerned spiritually.* Because of sin, sinners will only accept and understand the things of God in so far as He Himself makes us to, by breathing His own life into us, and His love, with His Spirit, who is His life, and His love, and His very innermost self.

We are of the world. In our hearts and minds we are always turning away from God, as we are turned away from Him already. Instead we seek that which is of the world; we might even convince ourselves, or the evil one might, that that which is of the world is what is *really* from God, and at least almost as important as the Word of the cross, and perhaps more, that which might make us to *be somebody* in the eyes of the world, or in our own eyes, on the terms of this world, or otherwise make us feel good.

You see it, brethren, in your calling, the Apostle writes, though, that *not many are called who were wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble.* So there that is. In the early ages of the Church Christ, she was commonly perceived as a pack of women and slaves. On the other hand, the Apostle also seems to indicate that some, although *not many*, were, in fact, *wise according to the flesh, or mighty, or noble*; so there is that, also. But then, that matters but little, for it nevertheless holds true for them all, and for all Christians, that *the base things of the world, and the things which are despised, God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should boast in His presence.* Yes, for even for those who were somebody in the world, *wise according to the flesh, or mighty, or noble*, it holds true, what the Apostle also writes, although, in another Letter, that *you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world.* No Christian has anything to boast about before God, other than His goodness and mercy; but on the other hand, exactly that is what Christian worship is, to boast before God of His own goodness and mercy as we live under the Word of the cross, and praise His goodness and mercy, that, as the Apostle writes it, as we hear it today *because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written: "He who boasts, let him boast in the Lord."*

Now, this does not give us much reason to feel good about ourselves, does it? Well, it does not.

But then, that is not the point of the exercise, either, or rather, perhaps, exactly that is the point: If any one would boast, he should boast in the Lord, and rejoice in *His* goodness. For the Word of the cross shows the goodness of God to not only be greater than all, but also to be salvation and eternal life for us, that for love of us sinners, and for our salvation, the Son of God would have Himself crucified for us, and cursed and condemned, in our stead and on our behalf, in His own judgement against our sin, the ungodliness and unbelief and impurity we all have in us, in our hearts and minds, and make manifest in our lives. Having Himself paid the price and penalty for the sin of all sinners, He has made us righteous and right before His judgement, so that we shall not suffer for ever in His wrath, but rather live and be with Him in His heavenly Kingdom. This is the promise proclaimed to us in the Word of the cross, as His faithful Church proclaims it; and with His promise, all that He promises is given to us, freely and for nothing, out of His goodness alone.

His love for us sinners, and so also for you, has proven itself greater than all. And in that, you should rejoice, as Christians do, more than anything else.

And for those who have eyes to see it, and ears to hear, the Word of the cross comes also with *relief*. Yes, for it means that you have no need to worry about who you are in the eyes of the world, or are not, or even in your own eyes, on the terms of the world. To God you are precious, so that the Son of God would suffer and die for you. And Christ Jesus has become for us not only wisdom from God, but also, as the Apostle writes it, *righteousness and sanctification and redemption*; not only does He rescue you from eternal death and damnation, by the Word of the cross, unto eternal life with God in glory, He makes you right with Himself, for that is what *righteousness* is, to be right with God, and He makes you *holy*, for that is what *sanctification* means, and makes you a *saint*, for a *saint* is a *holy one*, and He makes you holy as He Himself is holy, pure and perfect and pleasing to God. Your salvation, or *redemption*, means nothing less.

Therefore is it that we as His faithful Church *preach Christ crucified*; well, not only therefore, but also because He *commands* it, because it is the only true worship of Him. But it is therefore we preach Christ crucified as *joyfully* as we do, as we cannot but do, as His Church and His Christians.

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