

05/10/20

Cantate, 4th Sunday after Easter
The promise of the Holy Spirit

John 16: 4b-15

And these things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.

But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’

But because I have said these things, sorrow has filled your heart.

Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.

And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.

Of sin, because they do not believe in Me;

Of righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you see Me no more;

Of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.

However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.

He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.

All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Once again our Gospel-text for this fourth Sunday after Easter comes from our Lord’s “Farewell Address” which He delivered to His disciples as they were gathered together on the Thursday of the first Holy Week for their last meal with Him. We should note that this discourse in its entirety is one of the most remarkable examples of the pure, self-giving love which our Savior showed to these—His disciples—and which He shows also to us.

Our Lord was acutely aware of—and He had already spoken to His disciples in detail about—what He would endure in the hours ahead. All His sufferings were described in the Scriptures—Moses and the Psalms and the Prophets—the holy writings which Jesus had heard and studied already as a Child and which He knew by heart. He knew that one of His friends would betray Him, and that He would be arrested, put on trial, and belied by false witnesses. He knew also that He would be mocked and beaten with fists,

that His back would be torn by the whip, and that finally He would be crucified to death. He knew all the sufferings He would endure. And yet, as He speaks to them, His concern is only to help His disciples. Because of His infinite love, He thinks of their needs. He speaks to prepare them, to give them comfort for their time of sorrow, to give them strength for the hours and days of fear which lay ahead for them. It is because He loves them so intensely that our Lord wants them to know that He will send the Holy Spirit to them to fill their preaching with the power which would build the kingdom of God. And our Savior's words are meant also for us.

I

“It is to your advantage that I go away,” Jesus says to them, “for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” His disciples were already saddened because Jesus had told them that He was about to depart and go to His Father. They did not fully understand what He meant, but it filled them with sorrow to think He would be gone. Therefore our Lord gives them this promise. He was indeed about to go to His Father. But that would be necessary. In doing so, Jesus would complete the saving mission for which He had come. He would return to His Father by way of the cross on the hill Golgotha where He would give His life as the sacrifice of atonement for the sin of all humanity. He would return to His Father also by way of the tomb from which He would rise in triumph on that first Easter morning. And He would return by ascending to His Father's right hand of power and authority, to fill all things and to rule all things for the good of His Church. Only then would He send to them the Helper—the Holy Spirit—who would fill their preaching with the life-creating power needed to raise fallen sinners to faith in Him.

“I will send (the Helper) to you,” Jesus says—the promise He would keep in such a spectacular way on the first Christian Pentecost. Yes, their relationship would change, but it would change for the better. These disciples would be His apostles who would preach His Gospel of forgiveness. Through their preaching, people would come to believe in Christ Jesus as their Savior, dying sinners would be raised to life, and the kingdom of God would increase. That is His promise to them. They would not fully grasp His meaning now. But in the dark hours ahead, they could meditate on what He told them, their understanding could begin to grow, and the light of His promise could begin to replace the fear and darkness in their hearts.

II

The Spirit, Jesus wants His disciples to know, would be the convincing power in the word which they preached. “He will convict the world... of sin,” Jesus tells them, “because they do not believe in Me; of

righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.” As Martin Luther pointed out in a sermon on this same text, our Savior’s language here is dense and difficult—tightly packed with meaning. His words would become clear to His disciples only after His death and resurrection; they are clear to us only because they are explained to us in the apostolic writings they have left to us.

Through their preaching, the Holy Spirit would convict people of sin, Jesus says, “because they do not believe in (Him).” The power of the Spirit would fill their preaching of God’s Law to unmask the sin which infects all humanity—the fallenness which is rooted finally in this, that people turn away from their Creator-and-Savior God in unbelief. The Spirit, Jesus says, will convict people “of righteousness, because (He was) going to the Father.” Through the Gospel which they preached, the Holy Spirit would work in people’s hearts the miracle of faith in the saving work of Christ Jesus who has fulfilled the Law for us—lived a perfectly righteous life in our place. In what Luther called the “Great Exchange,” Christ took our sin as His own and atoned for it all with His blood, and through our faith in Him which is the Spirit’s gift, Christ’s righteousness is given to us—counted as ours by the Father. And the Spirit would also, Jesus says, convict people “of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.” The Gospel of Christ announces the triumph of our Lord over death and over the Prince of Darkness—His victory over and final judgment upon our bitterest enemy.

The Helper—the Holy Spirit—would be the life-giving power in that word which these disciples would preach. During the dark days ahead, the comfort of that promise of Christ could begin to take root and grow in their hearts.

III

You and I are able to understand this densely packed language which Jesus uses—understand that our Lord is here describing the convincing power of the Holy Spirit in Law and Gospel—because we have the apostolic word which those disciples have left to us. Jesus says to them that the Holy Spirit would “guide (them) into all truth.” He would share with them what was spoken in the inner councils of our triune God—what the Spirit heard from the Father and the Son about the Son’s saving work. It is that Spirit-filled Gospel of Christ which, in the Epistle lesson for today, St. James calls the “implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

It is a special and timely blessing for us today to hear and to ponder what Jesus says about the convincing work of the Holy Spirit through His Word. The coronavirus which right now so deeply and negatively affects

our lives cannot stop Christ from revealing Himself and His saving love to us. The Spirit of God is not be bound by rules of “quarantine.” He enters our homes through the Bible on our coffee-table—through the Gospel of Christ which that book presents to us. The Spirit of God is not held back by guidelines about “social distancing.” He literally enters right into each one of us through that Gospel—to work faith in Christ in our hearts and to guide with our Savior’s love what we think and say and do.

We pray that our merciful Lord will quickly bring to an end this strange period of threatening sickness through which we must live. But in the meantime, it is a precious blessing to us to hear our Lord’s promise in our text—to know that His Holy Spirit builds us up in our faith through the Word about Christ Jesus which we can read and ponder in our homes.

May the Spirit of God work in our hearts to convince us of our risen Savior’s love, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.