

INI

John 4,46-54

Trinity 21 — 16 October 2016

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Holy Gospel According to Saint John, which was read earlier:

Jesus therefore said to [the official], “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe.”⁴⁹ The royal official said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your son lives.” So the man believed the Word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way. And as he was going down, his servants met him and told him, “Your son lives!”

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Signs can be important. It is important to read signs correctly. In fact, in spiritual matters, they can be matters of life and death.

If memory serves correctly, a few weeks ago, there was a story about a marathon in Napa that was a qualifying race for the Boston Marathon. Unfortunately, the race course was not very well marked and some of the runners took wrong turns, went off course, and were disqualified – which meant that even though their times were good enough to qualify for the Boston Marathon, they were

disqualified.

Now that's really sad for those who were enthusiastic runners and were chomping at the bit to compete in Boston, but it is hardly the end of the world.

In today's Gospel lesson, however, we are presented with a seemingly weary Jesus commenting on what people were expecting of Him – signs and wonders! Today's Gospel lesson, however, speaks about signs and how to read them correctly. This brings me to today's sermon topic, "**Reading Signs Correctly.**" I'll develop this topic in three parts:

1) Why Signs?

2) Reading The Signs Correctly; and,

3) Following The Signs Correctly.

1) Why Signs? In today's lesson, we read of a royal official, a nobleman, who walked miles to see Jesus. To see Jesus, he went southwest from the village of Capernaum to the village of Cana. While the distance is only about 20 miles, the road winds up and down around the hills of Galilee, so the walk probably took the better part of a day.

The man took time away from his duties because he was desperate. His son was ill with a fever and was at the point of death. So with this heavy burden weighing him down, the official came to seek Jesus' help.

The man had probably heard that Jesus healed, that in the language of the day, Jesus did "signs and wonders."

As the official walked towards Cana, perhaps some questions

crossed his mind. What did the official think about Jesus? Who did he think Jesus was? What did he think Jesus could do? And if Jesus decided to do something, how would Jesus do it? But we really do not know whether he had any clear answers by the time he reached Jesus.

What is beyond doubt is that when he finally reached Jesus he asked Jesus for the one thing needful: “Come with me and heal my son, for he is at the point of death.”

The official’s son was hovering between life and death, and it seemed that death would soon be the winner in the struggle. The language makes it clear that the official was insistent and he repeated his plea for Jesus’ assistance. It is also clear that the official thought that Jesus had to be physically present at the dying boy’s bedside and there do something — perhaps have Jesus lay His hands on the boy’s feverish body — in order for any miracle to happen.

Jesus’ answer to the official, however, seems to our ears to verge on heartlessness. Jesus said:

“Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.”

Even before, we know that Jesus felt physically and perhaps even spiritually exhausted. Jesus spoke about being a prophet without honor in His own country. Jesus saw that the Galileans were only welcoming Him as some kind of circus performer who did all sorts of wonderful tricks.

Jesus thus rejects the attitude of the people, the people who expected to see some sort of traveling sideshow performer, some

miracle worker.

But during His earthly ministry Jesus did perform miracles, or, “attesting signs.” These signs had only one purpose – to point out to all that Jesus was indeed God’s Son, the Messiah.

They were sign posts along the highway of life that pointed not to the miracles but to He Who did the miracles, to Whom Jesus was and why He had come.

Thus we come to:

2) Reading The Signs Correctly. Jesus did perform signs and wonders, but in performing them, He meant that those signs should be read correctly.

Years ago I saw a really funny commercial that promoted “clarity,” that is, reading signs so that the meaning is clear and unambiguous – however, today the commercial may not be so funny. In the commercial there is a fellow in a kind of avant garde restaurant, seemingly frequented by bohemian looking individuals. He has to go to the bathroom. He finds the restrooms but on both doors — presumably one for men and the other for women — are abstract paintings which make it impossible to tell which is which. At that moment one of the doors opens and you can almost see a light bulb go off in the fellow’s head, “A ha! Now I’ll be able to tell which is which by seeing whether a man or woman is coming out.” No such luck. The person who comes out looks and is dressed in such a manner that it is impossible to tell whether it is a man or a woman. The commercial ends at the man stands there, more desperate but still as confused. A voice over to the viewing audience says, “There is something to be said for clarity.”

When we look to Jesus, we do not want confusion, we want clarity.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, it would seem that sin clouded the minds of many. They refused to heed or read what the Old Testament said about the coming of the Messiah. For the people of Jesus' day, as well as ours, sin, flesh, and the devil always stand ready to portray Jesus only as a circus performer, no more and no less.

Of this attitude, St. Paul said, "The Jews seek signs but we preach Christ crucified" (1 Corinthian 1,22). Jesus Himself said that the only sign that would be given to the people would be the sign of Jonah, that is, that He would be in the earth for three days.

Jesus would indeed go to the Cross and die. He would lie in the grave, but then He would rise to life again. Here is the ultimate sign to show to all people that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus performed many signs and miracles, but His death and subsequent resurrection is the greatest sign, for here He earned for us the forgiveness of sins, in which life always and ultimately triumphs over death.

All the signs and wonders Jesus performed during His earthly ministry pointed towards the Cross — the sign which stands as a beacon throughout the ages. That sign speaks of the clarity of the forgiveness of sins, which gives life and salvation.

How tragic it is when our flesh, sin, and the devil would seek to obscure that sign. How tragic it is when even so-called Lutheran churches permit people to teach and preach that Jesus did not physically rise from the dead.

Back in 2002 in Canada at an ELCIC congregation — think ELCA north —, Elizabeth and I attended the funeral of a 99 year-old woman. She had lived a full life. The obituary was written by one of the children. One of her great joys was to read the Bible to her family and to hold out to them the Cross of Jesus. She had passed on her faith to her children, and they to theirs. The Holy Spirit worked faith through the Word in their hearts and as they continued faithfully to read that Word and attend services so that faith was nourished and sustained. How tragic that at the funeral address the vacancy pastor only mentioned Jesus once, and that was in a passing reference to “Jesus the Christ.” You may think, “So what?” But when Jesus is only spoken of like that — that is, as “the Christ” — it is a code phrase that he who is speaking does not believe that Jesus rose physically from the dead; rather, in some group hallucination the apostles only felt Jesus had risen. This is the same as ripping down the sign of the Cross. I could only thank God that at least the liturgy, the order of service, did not leave this impression, but instead put up the sign of the Cross that the pastor would otherwise have ripped down, if only others would have caught the real meaning of his words.

But we should always be:

3) Following The Signs Correctly. But the royal official in our Gospel reading followed the sign, he followed the Word of Jesus when Jesus said, “Go, your son lives.”

Originally the official had wanted Jesus to accompany him, perhaps because he felt that only if Jesus were physically present at his son’s bedside could some miracle occur. But Jesus only spoke a word.

The amazing thing is that the official believed that Word, and

acted on that Word, and started on the long journey back to Capernaum. On the way, the official received word that his son lived, and that the healing had occurred at the exact moment that Jesus had spoken.

The words of Jesus changed this official's heart and life. He believed the Word of Jesus and acted on it — he started back home without the physical presence of Jesus.

What happened now to this official and his family was far more important than the physical healing of his son, as important as that was. He believed! And on account of that faith, centered in the Word, real life came to that official as well as his family, his household. This meant that even though death would one day overtake all of them, they had the promise that death would not have the last word. They had the promise of He Who says, "Because I live, you shall live also."

But Jesus has given all of us His Word, a Word which the Holy Spirit uses to create and sustain faith, and preserve us and all believers in that faith. He gives us that Word in our Baptism, which forgives sins; He gives us that Word in Holy Communion, which gives forgiveness of sins; He gives us that Word through the Scriptures, which always point us to the Cross of Jesus.

Jesus is a sign post, His Cross is something to which we can always confidently cling. When life gets troubled, when the world, our flesh, and the devil would try to tear down the sign posts of faith and redirect us away from Jesus, Jesus always shows us the way back through His Cross, — what He has done for us.

Peter remarked once that there is no other name given under heaven and earth by which we can be saved. This Word finds its

focus in the Cross. This is His Cross, which assures us that He is with us even through the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Conclusion: In this world, we have signs all around us. Some are correct and some are incorrect. Some are clear and some are unclear.

The sign of the Cross is clear. Sin, our flesh, and the devil would try to change or remove that sign. Why? So that people might become confused about how God has come to us. If confused, people wander about aimlessly or find solutions in false religions — maybe it should serve as a warning that Mormon houses of worship have no Cross. Some try to rob the Cross of its power by denying the resurrection.

But God gives us a sign which is clear and powerful. As Paul said, “Jews seek signs, but we preach Christ crucified.” The only sign given to us is the sign of the Cross. Through the Cross God clings to us in Christ in order that we might hold on to Him for our life and salvation. Amen.

Now, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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