

Sermon for Quinquagesima Sunday

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*Hauspostille*

Martin Luther, "Quinquagesima," Matthias Loy, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's House-Postil, or, Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year. Volume 1. Two Volumes. Second Edition.* (Columbus, Ohio; J. A. Schulze, 1884), pp. 334-346.

**Luke 18, 31-43.**

Then He took unto Him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. For He shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: and they shall scourge Him, and put Him to death; and the third day He shall rise again. And they understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken. And it came to pass, that as He was come nigh unto Jericho, a certain blind man sat by the way side begging: and hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant. And they told him, that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by. And he cried, saying, Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And they which went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried so much the more, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me. And Jesus stood, and commanded him to be brought unto Him: and when he was come near, He asked him, saying, What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? And he said, Lord, that I may receive my sight. And Jesus said unto him, Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee. And immediately he received his sight, and followed Him, glorifying God: and all the people, when they saw it, gave praise unto God.

The Gospel for this day comprises two parts. In the first we have the prediction which Christ makes to His apostles concerning His passion. To these words the angels refer, when they, on Easter morning, tell the women at the tomb, Luke 24: "Remember how He spake unto you when He was yet in Galilee, saying, the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again." For these words were spoken by Christ on His last journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, where He was crucified. The second part of our Gospel relates the wonderful cure of the blind man.

The Evangelist states three times that the disciples did not comprehend this prediction. They regarded His words as having some unusual

and hidden meaning. They understood not a single word of these sayings, for they reasoned thus: This man performs so many miracles, He raises the dead, He gives the blind their sight, etc., from all of which it is evident that He will yet become a person of high position, for it is plain that God is with Him. Besides this, the Scriptures declare of Him that He shall have a glorious kingdom and exercise dominion over kings and princes on earth, while we, His servants, will also become princes and great lords. For who could in the least injure such a Person, who controls death and cures all infirmities with a single word? If He so desires, He can make the heathens His subjects and put beneath His feet all His enemies. Hence they came to the conclusion that God loves Him too much to suffer any harm to befall Him; His

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sayings in regard to His sufferings and death must surely have another meaning. Thus reasoned the apostles in their simplicity.

God's works are indeed incomprehensible, if they are considered before they are accomplished, but as soon as they are finished they are perfectly plain and intelligible. St. John states repeatedly that the disciples did oftentimes not understand the words of Christ, until the acts to which they referred had been accomplished. It is therefore necessary to have faith in the Word of God, for when He speaks He refers to matters far beyond the power of our comprehension; hence it behooves us to believe what He says, and then we shall fully experience and understand the true meaning of His words.

I will show this by an example. The Word of God tells us of the resurrection of the dead; our reason cannot conceive of it. Hence we see that those skilled in the wisdom of this world, the learned who adore reason and by it wish to interpret the Word of God, laugh at us and deem us fools, because we believe that there is another life after the present is ended. Again, reason will never comprehend how it is that God became man and was born of a virgin. The fact must be accepted in faith until we come into that other life, where we shall see it all and say: Now I understand and see that it is really true what I have believed. Reason also makes light of the fact that through Baptism with water the mercy and grace of God is conferred upon us without our merits, and that we have the forgiveness of our sins in holy absolution. She cannot understand how this is possible, and regards those who believe it as fools and simpletons. She argues thus: If God is to be appeased, something more is needed than this; good works and penances must do it. [Some others think] so too; [they] always urges people to depend on their good works.

Reason obstinately refuses to believe that through Baptism and faith in Christ we obtain salvation; she regards the Word as an inferior matter

and him who proclaims it as a poor, infirm sinner. She considers it folly for man to entrust his body and soul to such a faith. No matter how often and plainly the Word of God is proclaimed to men, reason cannot and will not accept it: she has no faith. The world will therefore ever regard the holy Gospel as a heresy and devilish doctrine, which allures people away from the truth and prevents them from doing good works. This is the judgment of reason.

Let us therefore learn to have faith in all simplicity, so that we can say from our heart: What God says is true, whether my senses corroborate it or not. He is omnipotent and can fulfill His Word, and though I do not fully comprehend it while on earth, I shall know it all in the life to come.

The Scriptures exhibit the same truth in other examples. Before David enters upon the combat with Goliath, he has the faith that he shall conquer and slay his enemy, as he says to Saul: "The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, He will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine." 1 Sam. 17. He says: This uncircumcised Philistine shall fare like the lion and the bear, for he has blasphemed the Lord's anointed. To the Philistine he says: "This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee." David spoke these words publicly, so that all could hear them, and they who heard them laughed at them and regarded them as idle boasting. Nor would they have been anything else if they had been merely the words of David; but they were the declarations of God, and David believed them before they were fulfilled. The result justified his faith, and it mattered not whether others laughed at his confidence or not, whether they believed or doubted his assertions; what he said came to pass and was true nevertheless. Reason thought it absurd that little David should undertake the contest with Goliath, that he with no weapon but a sling and pebble should think of conquering the giant. David however believed,

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and went and accomplished it. Then it was evident to all that he had spoken the truth.

As long as David had simply said: "This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand," the matter seemed incredible and impossible. Reason went to work and calculated with Saul, 1 Sam. 17. David is but a lad, a rustic shepherd, who has never been in battle, and goes into the conflict with staff and sling as if to drive away a dog, so that Goliath mockingly asks him: "Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves?" The giant comes up with his heavy armor and ponderous spear. Is this not an unequal equipment, and is it not foolhardy for the little slinger David to undertake what the boldest warrior in the camp did not venture to attempt? David could not understand how it would be done, but he believed firmly that God would be his help, and would punish the blasphemy of the Philistine. His faith was not put to shame.

Thus it will ever be. God's word and will are not believed before they are accomplished. Yet, what He wills is carried out quickly and easily. Our duty is to believe His Word implicitly, even before it is fulfilled. Reason can never understand how Baptism is a laver of regeneration, nor how the bodies of the dead will arise on the day of resurrection. The bodies of many pious persons even are eaten by birds of prey, by dogs and wolves; some are burned to ashes and these cast into rivers, as it happened to John Huss at the Council of Constance. Reason asks: How can God gather these particles again into a body? It seems indeed incredible and impossible, but God declares that it shall be done. He is almighty and can bring forth something out of nothing; therefore we believe that He can do this also, and it will surely be done.

What were we a hundred years ago? Just what the child is which shall be born twenty, thirty or forty years after we have ceased to live. Since God knoweth how to create all things out of nothing, He will surely be able to make some-

thing again out of that which once was. Therefore we need not inquire whether a thing be possible, but whether God has said that it shall be done; if He has made such declaration, it will be done, though it may seem otherwise entirely impossible. My inability to comprehend how something is done, does not make its execution impossible for the Lord, who is omnipotent and can make something of nothing.

Hence those people who would measure God and His works by the standard of their reason are, beyond all endurance, provoking idiots. Because I cannot restore to life the dead, shall it therefore be impossible for God to do it? Take care then, and do not judge God's word and power by your own imagination and ability. If your reason were capable of understanding everything, God might have kept His revelation to Himself. But His declarations are a proof that our human reason is imperfect and knows but little. God's Word is far above the limits of our reason, as our experience teaches us.

I proclaim to you the forgiveness of your sins, and absolve you according to the command of Christ. You hear the word of absolution, and when you have heard it and are absolved from sin, you may still not feel that God and His angels smile on you benignly. You know nothing of that joy of which the Lord speaks when He says: The angels in heaven shall rejoice over a sinner that repenteth.

If you are baptized, you will have after Baptism the same skin and flesh which you had before. Shall therefore Absolution and Baptism be of no effect? Never! Learn rather to say: God has baptized me, God has absolved me by His Word; I firmly believe that He is gracious unto me, and has received me as His child, that Christ is my Lord and Brother, and that the holy angels rejoice on my account. This I believe, though I have no especial feelings about it. I care not whether [others] believe this also or not; I will believe it, for God is true and His Word does not lie.

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The disciples did not know this art, nor did they exercise this faith, else they would not have disputed about the words of Christ, nor would they have been perplexed at them, but they would have simply believed them. They should have known that what He says is true and will be accomplished. The blind man mentioned in our Gospel understood this art of believing much better. His eyes are totally blind, yet as soon as he heard the word: "Receive thy sight," he believed it, and obtained what he wished and believed. The simple word in his case referred also to something not yet accomplished, for the eyes of the blind were yet shut; but he believed the word, and the deed of restoration to sight immediately followed according to his faith. Thus ought the disciples also to have believed. Though they could not comprehend how the sayings of Christ could be accomplished, they should have believed them at His Word. The Word simply requires faith.

To trust implicitly the Word of God and to waver not at all in regard to its statements, is taught us in the first part of our Gospel to-day. [Some] knows nothing of such faith, nor [do they] teach it. But you have learned it; keep it well fixed in your mind that a Christian heart is one which hears the Word of God concerning the forgiveness of sins and believes it without doubting, though it neither sees nor feels it. This will afterwards follow of itself. First true faith, then the experience and effects of faith with all its blessings. The others, ... all unbelievers, will then cry out until they are hoarse, but all in vain: Would that we had believed; who could have thought that this was true! They would now believe, but it is too late; they have postponed their faith too long.

Let us therefore never be offended at the Word of God, even if it seems strange, improbable or impossible; if God has spoken it, it must be fulfilled. Let us never look to the possibility of its execution, but only to the fact that God has so spoken. He is potent enough to bring His declarations to a fulfillment under all circumstances. Whoever doubts this, blasphemes God most

wickedly. We must earnestly endeavor to avoid this sin of incredulity when God's Word speaks to us, even though we do not comprehend its meaning; for it will surely happen even as the Word declares. Thus we have the Word of God in Baptism, in the Lord's Supper, in the absolution and in the preaching; here God Himself speaks to us and pronounces us free from sin. This we must believe as an eternal truth, and never doubt it in the least.

In the second part of our Gospel, concerning the blind man by the wayside, the Evangelist teaches us the necessary art of begging in the presence of God; how we ought never to be afraid or ashamed to ask Him unceasingly for everything that we need. He who is bashful is a poor beggar. We must here lay aside false timidity, remembering that God loves to be importuned by us in prayer. He delights to bestow upon us blessings, and is pleased if we trust in Him and ask much at His hands. And we are surely much in need of His gifts; therefore we should ask of Him as readily as He is willing to give. If we would wait with our petitions until we are worthy of the blessings of God, we would never have an opportunity to ask anything of Him. Hence all shamefacedness should be laid aside, and we should open our mouth boldly in prayer, and say: Lord, here I am in great trouble of body and of soul; I need Thy assistance and comfort; refuse it not, but let me enjoy it according to Thy gracious promises.

The beggars by the wayside and in the alleys are well acquainted with the art of asking; necessity was their teacher. Yet people do not like to be importuned in this manner, and frequently turn away such supplicants with angry words. God however loves such incessant suitors and importunate beggars, as we see one in our text. The blind man heard the noise of the company passing by and inquired what it meant. When he learnt that Jesus was there he immediately began to cry out: "Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who went before endeavored to si-

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lence him, but in vain; he persisted in his cry. Yea, the more they rebuke him the louder he calls.

He was a regular beggar, importunate and persevering, just such an one as God is pleased with. We ought therefore to imitate this example and come to Christ with our prayer, earnestly and perseveringly, saying: O Lord, we are poor, miserable sinners; forgive us our trespasses and bring us into Thy kingdom. Help us here and help us there, yea, help us everywhere! He who thus asks and unceasingly persists in his prayer does well; God is delighted with it, for he is not so easily annoyed as we men are. We are soon wearied by urgent prayers and become angry at him who persists in them; but He loves to be importuned and to be regarded as willing to give. Therefore we ought to pray to Him repeatedly and say: Lord, I come as a beggar before Thee to spread Thy honor abroad. Thou hast commanded us to call upon Thee, and hast promised to hear us and to grant us our prayer, for thus Thou art honored. Therefore, O Lord, take not into account my unworthiness, but the fact that I am in want of Thy help, and that Thou art the Helper of all sinners. I call upon Thee for Thy honor's sake, and Thou wilt not turn Thine ear away from me, &c.

Such a prayer, persevering and bold, is pleasing to God. As soon as the blind man begins with his prayer, the Lord calls him to His side, and all others had to make way. The blind man, on the other hand, is in no wise timid or ashamed, nor is he reluctant to pray on account of his unworthiness. The Lord asked him: "What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee?" that He might manifest His readiness to help. He meant to say by this question: Ask what thou wilt and it shall be done unto thee. The blind man is not slow with his petition; he answers: "Lord, that I may receive my sight." Christ replied: "Receive thy sight." Short but earnest and effective was the prayer, and graciously was it answered. We must learn from this man how to pray, namely, boldly and faithfully, presenting all our troubles to Christ in the same faith that He will hear us and grant us our request.

[We must always think that can always have confidence in our own prayer.] As soon as afflictions come, hasten to the closet and fall upon thy knees and say: Lord, here I come in my distress; I must have Thy succor, though I am unworthy of it. Thou hast said: Call upon me in the time of trouble, therefore I pray; look down upon my suffering and misery and rescue me for Thy honor's sake. Thus we ought to importune God with our prayer, and doubt not in the least that He will hear us for Christ's sake, and give us what we need and is good for us. The promise in this is plain and sure: "Whatever ye shall ask in My name that shall be given unto you." Only we must not desist from our asking, but continue in it. The more we pray, the more will God be pleased with us; our begging does not weary Him. Yea, if our prayer is sufficiently earnest and confident He will give us in the self-same hour what we ask, though He might have otherwise postponed the fulfillment of our request; He heeds our anxious prayer. Thus I hope that the day of judgment is near at hand, and that it will not tarry long, because of the anxious prayers of the Christians who long for it with many sighs. The Lord Himself gives an instance of the effect of importunate prayer, Luke 18, where the widow urges her request so vehemently that the judge, who feared neither God nor man, could not withstand her any more, but said: I will help her that she may cease from troubling me. "And shall not God," continues Christ, "avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily." That is: Prayer causes God to hasten what otherwise would be delayed.

The prayers of the Christians, if persisted in, have the effect to bring to pass what otherwise would be deferred, or would even not take place at all. This example must therefore teach us to become impudent beggars, who persist in their request and urgently press their cause, saying: Lord, it cannot be denied, I am a poor degraded sinner; I know full well that I have deserved, by my great

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and glaring disobedience, much greater penalty and suffering, but because I am full of sin and misery I come unto Thee, and according to Thy command and promises I pray that Thou wouldst be merciful unto me, and forgive me my sins and rescue me from my distress. Guide me by Thy Holy Spirit, and bestow upon me what I need to continue in the truth. Be also the defense of Thy Church and continue unto us Thy Word. I cannot argue here that I am pious; the fact that I am needy suffices; Thou art kind and ready to give what is beneficial to me for soul and body.

If we pray thus, and continue in our supplication, God will surely answer us as Christ did the blind man in our Gospel: "What wilt thou that I shall do unto thee? Receive thy sight; thy faith hath saved thee." To pray and not to have faith in prayer, would be mocking God. Faith, however, rests entirely upon this one truth that God, for Christ's sake, is merciful unto us, that He will hear, and protect and save us. May Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior, thus assist us! Amen.