Devotion for Easter Wednesday - 30 March 2016, Anno Domini



***19****Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you.* ***20****And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord.* ***21****Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.* ***22****And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost:* ***23****Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.* (John 20:19-23)

            ***Then the same day at evening*** that is, the first day of the week, the same day when the women had gone early to find the vacant tomb. The time was a time of growing darkness (evening). The disciples, though they had hearsay evidence of Christ’s resurrection, it was not as certain to them as a first hand witness. When the hour grows dark, the LORD may surprise us with Light! Those wicked of this world seek to separate themselves from the reality of a Living God. But the day will come when that separation will become real and eternal. At that day they will run to the mountains and plead for the mountains to fall on them to relieve them of their misery of separation from God, for to be separated from God is no less than Hell itself. A kind and consoling word will never be uttered in Hell.

            Since there is a separation from God, there is no mercy. To the reprobate sinner, there remains only *a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses:  Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace*? (Heb 10:27-29) I speak often with men, women, and young people who argue for a different kind of mercy than God offers – a mercy that ignores the Law of God, and attempts to adjudicate intentional sin by false claims of love and mercy. Yes, God forgives, but He does not condone habitual and intentional sin that goes without repentance.

Willful sin is an affront to a Holy God. If God condemns adultery (and He does in the most explicit terms), it is an offense to the Holy Spirit for a professing Christian to indulge in that sin. If God condemns homosexuality (and He does in the most explicit terms), it is an affront to the Holy Spirit to persist in the sin after forgiveness of the same by God. *But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire*. (2 Peter 2:22) I do not say these warnings out of any malicious umbrage to the sinner, but out of warm affection and regard for their souls that may yet be saved by a solemn warning believed. The heart of man desires, continually, to sin; and he will invent many and varied justifications for his sin, but God will not honor those gossamer and flimsy veils for unmitigated sin at the Judgment Seat. It is God’s Law, or Mercy, by which we shall be judged. If we choose Law, we perish. If we choose mercy, we will be changed into souls with a humble regard for God’s Sovereignty, and a heart of contrition for all sin.

            What has this to do with our Easter message today? It is germane in many points. We may presume, erroneously, that God is not privy to either our outward sins, or those of the thoughts of our hearts; but He has constant access to every single act and thought of every person born of woman.

                ***When the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews***, there comes an unexpected joy! Men tend to gather around common fears in time of trouble. These men were fearful of the same evil men as those who crucified our Lord. They were in reclusive retreat. Do not judge them harshly for we would, beyond doubt, be of the same frame of mind under similar conditions. But here they had gathered quietly and inconspicuously. There was no singing and no praising. Despair was in the air. They had shut and secured the door against ALL comers.

            ***Came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you****.* The disciples had certainly not expected this ‘intruder.’ “***Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them***! (Matt 18:20). Jesus always provides that which is most needful. These men feared for their lives and yearned, beyond measure, for peace. At just such a time, Christ the “***Sun of Righteousness arises with healing in His wings*.**” (Mal 4:2) He stood in the very midst of them so that all could equally view His presence and know it to be Him. No doors will separate Him from His people for He, Himself, is the Door to the Sheepfold!

            ***And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord****.* Though we may hide ourselves from man and God, He will not hide Himself from us when we gather in His name. He never comes in a doubtful fashion, or as an imposter. He proves Himself by the terrible wounds of His crucifixion. This could leave no doubt in the minds of the disciples as to His identity. They were well aware of the cruel ten inch nails driven through His Hands and Feet, and of the terrible pierce made into His side which made an opening in His heart for those of us of later ages to enter therein. They were glad when they saw the LORD. Should we not be glad also? We may be made glad by seeing Him through His Word, for He is the Word. And the Comforter will always point to Him if we seek Him.

            ***Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you****.* Do not believe that I come bringing more fears and trouble than you presently have had. Jesus reinforces His greeting of peace by reiterating it. Anything which comes to us, the believers, from the Father will always be for our good. The Father has sent Christ to us! We often reflect on the great love of Christ in suffering for us on the cross – and that love is, indeed, beyond any which we can imagine. But how often do we consider the immeasurable love of the Father in sending us His Well-Beloved and Only-Begotten Son to suffer the insults, offences, and torture of the cross for us. You may take it as a given that the Father suffered every whit as much as the Son (and maybe even more). The Father, in His abundant Love, sent His Son Jesus, to die for us - but not to die only, also to rise as well from the Tomb for us. Jesus was the perfectly obedient and loving Son. He did all that His Father had required. And He, too, acted out of an abundance of love which mortals cannot comprehend! His dying paid the price for our redemption. His resurrection assures us of a home in Heaven!

But we must know that love is the great power which drew Christ to the Cross. That love gift from the Father in sending His Son is now to be our own model in being sent by Christ into the whole world to preach the Gospel to all nations, tribes, and tongues.

            *And* ***when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost***. This act was to impart the breath of God (inspiration) to the Apostles to carry forth the evangelizing Gospel and, in so doing, act with heavenly authority.

            ***Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained***. What meaning do we associate with this counsel of Christ? Does the priest or minister possess power to forgive, or forego forgiveness of sins? Not at all. But having received the breath and inspiration Christ, we may clearly act in accordance with His Word to declare the forgiveness of sins which God has assured all who forsake and repent of sin. The best explanation I have seen is that of the great Bible scholar and teacher, Matthew Henry:

            *He said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost, thus showing that their spiritual life, as well as all their ability for their work, would be derived from him, and depended upon him. Every word of Christ which is received in the heart by faith, comes accompanied by this Divine breathing; and without this there is neither light nor life. Nothing is seen, known, discerned, or felt of God, but through this. After this, Christ directed the apostles to declare the only method by which sin would be forgiven. This power did not exist at all in the apostles as a power to give judgment, but only as a power to declare the character of those whom God would accept or reject in the day of judgment. They have clearly laid down the marks whereby a child of God may be discerned and be distinguished from a false professor; and according to what they have declared shall every case be decided in the day of judgment.*

            Jesus does not mean to grant a sacerdotal mystery in this last sentence. No man, or priest, can forgive sins – or even grant forgiveness of sins on behalf of God. We are to preach and teach the Gospel – precisely the same Gospel that we have heard and read in the Words of Christ. Those who hear, believe, and repent of sin, shall be saved by our preaching and teaching. Their sins have been remitted by our preaching of that sound doctrine and truth of the Gospel. Many will not receive the truth. In fact, their hearts may be hardened against that truth. What hardened their sinful hearts? Our preaching of truth hardened their hearts so that they will have no excuse at the Judgment. They will not be able to proclaim, “No one ever told us!” The Word of God is a two edged sword. “*For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do*.” (Heb 4:12-13) Being a discerner of the intents of the hearts and thoughts of men, it has a dual purpose – either to convict of sin, or to condemn in sin. It most often, unfortunately, condemns of sin since the greater numbers of mankind will always choose the broad road that leads down to destruction. BEWARE that easy and downward sloping path. Choose the Narrow Way that leads up to God. AMEN

Do we bear these marks?