

"THE CELTIC CROSS: THE CROSS OF REDEMPTION"  
COLOSSIANS 1:19-23  
MAUNDY THURSDAY  
MESSIAH, BOERNE  
MARCH 28, 2024

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY  
SPIRIT. AMEN.

TEXT: COL 1:19-23

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST:

WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE CROSS THAT IS THE FOCUS OF OUR  
LENTEN SERVICE THIS EVENING—THE CELTIC CROSS—YOU SEE  
SYMBOLIZED THE CENTRAL TRUTH THAT THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
PROCLAIMS: GOD TOOK ON THE FORM OF THE WORLD AND THE BURDEN  
OF THE WORLD THAT WE MIGHT HAVE THE HOPE OF ETERNAL LIFE IN  
HEAVEN. FIRST OF ALL, YOU PROBABLY RECOGNIZE THE CROSS  
THAT STANDS OUT SO PROMINENTLY. IT'S AN INSTRUMENT OF THIS  
WORLD—THIS EARTH—THE MEANS OF TORTURE ON WHICH OUR FELLOW  
HUMAN BEINGS HUNG THE LORD OF GLORY TO SUFFER AND DIE.  
SECOND, YOU SEE THE CIRCLE SURROUNDING THE INTERSECTION OF  
THE CROSS. IT SYMBOLIZES THE ETERNAL, WITHOUT BEGINNING  
AND WITHOUT END, AND IS A SIGN OF GOD. IN THIS COMBINATION  
WE SEE ETERNITY'S LORD SECURING AN ETERNAL REDEMPTION FOR  
US HUMAN BEINGS THROUGH AN INSTRUMENT OF THIS EARTH, THE  
CROSS.

THUS, THE CELTIC CROSS HELPS US GAIN INSIGHT INTO A VERY IMPORTANT UNDERSTANDING: GOD, WHO CAN'T BE SEEN WITH HUMAN EYES, COMES TO HIS CHILDREN THROUGH EARTHLY FORMS TO GIVE US THE GIFT OF REDEMPTION. TO BE EVEN MORE SPECIFIC, GOD COMES TO HIS CHILDREN THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, IN WHOM "GOD WAS PLEASED TO HAVE ALL HIS FULLNESS DWELL" (V 19) AND WHO MOST FULLY REVEALED GOD'S WILL AMONG US AND TOWARDS US. JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, REDEEMED US AND ALL CREATION THROUGH HIS SUFFERING AND DEATH ON THE CROSS OF CALVARY.

THIS TRUTH IS ESPECIALLY EVIDENT TONIGHT AS WE REMEMBER THE INSTITUTION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER THAT WAS INSTITUTED AT THE PASSOVER MEAL BEFORE CHRIST'S CRUCIFIXION. THE PASSOVER MEAL COMMEMORATED THE ONE DOMINANT EVENT THAT ISRAEL SO OFTEN TURNED TO WHEN IT WANTED TO TALK ABOUT GOD. WHEN GOD MADE HIMSELF KNOWN IN THE GREAT ACT OF PARTING THE WATERS OF THE RED SEA SO THAT HIS PEOPLE COULD PASS OVER ON DRY LAND AND CAUSED THE WATER TO RETURN OVER THE PURSUING ARMY OF PHARAOH, ISRAEL WAS CONVINCED THAT GOD'S ACTION IN AND THROUGH EARTHLY MEANS WAS THE SIGN OF HIS PRESENCE. THAT WAS THE MARK BY WHICH HE WAS TO BE IDENTIFIED: "I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD, WHO BROUGHT YOU OUT OF EGYPT, OUT OF THE LAND OF SLAVERY. YOU SHALL HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME" (EX 20:2-3).

FROM THAT TIME ON ISRAEL ALWAYS LOOKED FOR THE HAND OF GOD TO BE REVEALED WITHIN THE REALM OF HISTORY, ON THE PLAIN OF HUMAN ACTIVITY. ISRAEL'S WHOLE HISTORY, INCLUDING ITS CAPTIVITY, EXILE, AND RETURN FROM BABYLON, WERE SEEN FROM THIS FRAME OF REFERENCE: GOD, WHO CANNOT BE SEEN THROUGH EARTHLY EYES, COMES TO HIS CHILDREN ON EARTH THROUGH EARTHLY ACTIONS AND IN EARTHLY FORMS.

WHEN IT WAS PROCLAIMED THAT THE MESSIAH WAS THE ULTIMATE EXPRESSION OF THIS REVELATION OF GOD THROUGH HUMAN FORM, THAT WAS NOT NECESSARILY AN UNBELIEVABLE STATEMENT WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF ISRAEL'S UNDERSTANDING. HOWEVER, THAT IT SHOULD BE THE PARTICULAR MAN KNOWN AS JESUS OF NAZARETH THROUGH WHOM GOD WAS REVEALING HIMSELF WAS A SCANDAL, THAT IS, A DEADLY TRAP, TO MANY. GOD HAD ALWAYS MADE HIMSELF KNOWN IN THE EARTHLY DIMENSION, AND NOTHING MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO THINK OF HIM COMING AMONG THEM IN AND THROUGH A PROPHETIC FIGURE. THUS, IT WAS NOT SO MUCH THAT GOD COULD BE PRESENT HIMSELF IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER THROUGH FIGURES VISIBLE TO THE HUMAN EYE THAT MADE JESUS' CONTEMPORARIES REJECT HIM. IT WAS RATHER WHAT SEEMED TO BE A PRESUMPTUOUS CLAIM ON JESUS' PART THAT GOD'S UNIQUE MANIFESTATION WAS PRESENT IN AND THOROUGH HIM. HE SEEMED TO

HAVE NO CREDENTIALS FOR THE CLAIM, SO OVER AND OVER AGAIN THEY ASKED HIM FOR "A SIGN."

THE ONLY "SIGN" THAT JESUS WOULD OFFER THEM, HOWEVER, WAS "THE SIGN OF JONAH," AS HE CALLED IT, THREE DAYS AND NIGHTS SWALLOWED UP BY THE EARTH. THIS, ABOVE ALL, WAS THE SCANDAL OF JESUS CHRIST: THAT HE CLAIMED TO BE THE PRESENCE OF GOD AMONG THEM AND CLAIMED GOD'S POWER TO SERVE AND TO SAVE THOSE AROUND HIM. ON THIS VERY NIGHT HIS DISCIPLES WERE SCANDALIZED WHEN JESUS, WASHING THEIR FEET, TOLD THEM, "YOU CALL ME 'TEACHER' AND 'LORD,' AND RIGHTLY SO, FOR THAT IS WHAT I AM. NOW THAT I, YOUR LORD AND TEACHER, HAVE WASHED YOUR FEET, YOU ALSO SHOULD WASH ONE ANOTHER'S FEET" (13:13-14). THIS SERVICE, A CONTINUATION OF A LIFETIME GIVEN TO SERVICE AND ONE THAT WOULD CLIMAX ON THE NEXT DAY WITH HIS HUMBLE SUFFERING AND DEATH ON THE CROSS, WAS THE WAY JESUS "PROVED" THAT HE WAS THE LORD OF THE HEAVENS ON EARTH IN THE VISIBLE FORM OF A MAN.

THAT WAS THE SCANDAL FOR EVERYBODY TO THINK ABOUT. IT'S THE SCANDAL PUT FORTH BOLDLY IN THE CELTIC CROSS, SIGNIFYING THAT THE ETERNAL GOD SUBMITTED TO HUMAN NEEDS ON THE VERY EARTHLY CROSS THROUGH THE VERY HUMAN JESUS OF NAZARETH. IT SCANDALIZED MANY OF THE JEWS OF HIS TIME. IT SCANDALIZED THE ROMANS WHO OUTLAWED THE CHRISTIANS FOR SUCH

CLAIMS. IT SCANDALIZED SOME OF THE COLOSSIAN CONGREGATION, GIVING RISE TO ST. PAUL'S LETTER. AND IT CONTINUES TO SCANDALIZE PEOPLE TO THIS VERY DAY.

BUT YOU AND I LIVE BY THE CONFESSION OF ST. PAUL IN OUR TEXT: "FOR GOD WAS PLEASED TO HAVE ALL HIS FULLNESS DWELL IN HIM, AND THROUGH HIM TO RECONCILE TO HIMSELF ALL THINGS, WHETHER THINGS ON EARTH OR THINGS IN HEAVEN, BY MAKING PEACE THROUGH HIS BLOOD, SHED ON THE CROSS" (VV 19-20). THE EARTHLY BLOOD OF THE DIVINE CRUCIFIED ONE CHANGES EVERYTHING.

SURELY EVERYTHING NEEDED TO BE CHANGED. WE CATCH A GLIMPSE OF WHAT EARTHLY THINGS LOOK LIKE FROM THE ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE TEXT TONIGHT: "ONCE YOU WERE ALIENATED FROM GOD AND WERE ENEMIES IN YOUR MINDS BECAUSE OF YOUR EVIL BEHAVIOR" (V 21). WITH THESE WORDS THE DIVINE TELLS US WHAT IT SEES, AND WHAT IT SEES IS A LONG WAY FROM WHAT THE DIVINE INTENTION WAS IN THE ORIGINAL CREATION. THOSE WHO WERE MEANT TO BE SERVANTS BECAME THOSE WHO STRUGGLED FOR MASTERY. WHAT WAS MEANT TO BE A CREATURE BECAME AN IDOL. THOSE WHO WERE MEANT TO BE FRIENDS OF GOD WERE NOW HOSTILE TO HIM. AND WHAT WAS MEANT FOR DIVINE PLEASURE WAS NOW ESTRANGED FROM HIM.

ALL THIS IS SEEN PLAINLY BY ST. PAUL AS HE DESCRIBES IN JUST A FEW WORDS THE NEED OF EARTH THAT BROUGHT THE EVENTS OF THIS NIGHT AND TOMORROW TO PASS. THROUGH THESE EVENTS "[GOD] HAS RECONCILED . . . BY CHRIST'S PHYSICAL BODY THROUGH DEATH" THOSE WHO STOOD AGAINST HIM, AND NOW HE CALLS THEM BACK TO HIMSELF (V 22a). HE HAS DONE ALL THIS "TO PRESENT YOU HOLY IN HIS SIGHT, WITHOUT BLEMISH AND FREE FROM ACCUSATION" (V 22b). HE BEFRIENDS AND RECONCILES HIMSELF TO HIS ENEMIES. HE GIVES HIMSELF IN RECONCILING FASHION TO US HUMAN BEINGS WHO HAD MADE PLAIN THAT WE WANTED NOTHING TO DO WITH HIM. THIS IS THE MARVEL OF GOD'S GRACE.

HIS GRACE IS FAR MORE THAN A MERE THEORETICAL STATEMENT, HOWEVER. IT'S FLESHED OUT IN A BODY, ACTED OUT ON A CROSS, EMPOWERED FOR SERVICE, RECONCILED THROUGH HIS BLOOD. HERE, ON THE CELTIC CROSS, WE SEE HOW COMPLETELY THE LORD OF ALL ETERNITY HAS IDENTIFIED HIMSELF WITH OUR HUMAN AND EARTHLY SETTING. RECONCILIATION BETWEEN GOD AND PEOPLE IS EFFECTED BY THE DIVINE ONE FROM HEAVEN THROUGH TWO EARTHLY BEAMS OF WOOD CROSSED OVER ONE ANOTHER AND HOLDING FAST THE DYING BODY OF OUR HUMAN BROTHER.

AND SO, IS IT ANY LESS OF A WONDER TO LOOK ON THIS SIMPLE BREAD AND WINE BEFORE US THIS EVENING AS THE MEANS

OF OUR SALVATION? SURELY HERE, TOO, WE CAN SEE NOTHING BUT THE STUFF OF THIS EARTH. YET IT WAS STUFF OF THIS EARTH JUST LIKE THIS THAT JESUS TOOK UP IN HIS HANDS THAT FIRST MAUNDY THURSDAY EVENING, SAYING SUCH SIMPLE WORDS AS "THIS IS MY BODY" AND "THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT," ADDING "THIS DO IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME."

WITH THESE WORDS JESUS IS SAYING THAT WHENEVER BREAD AND WINE, THE EARTHLY SUBSTANCES SEEMINGLY INCAPABLE OF BEARING THE PRESENCE OF GOD TO US, ARE COUPLED WITH HIS WORD, HE WILL BE PRESENT FOR THOSE WHO EAT AND DRINK. THERE HE WILL BE BROUGHT BACK AMONG US IN AND THROUGH EARTHLY THINGS NO MORE IMPRESSIVE THAN HIS BODY AND BLOOD ONCE WERE TO THOSE AROUND HIM. THE WORD HE GIVES US WILL CALL HIM BACK AGAIN IN THAT SPECIAL PRESENCE CALLED "SACRAMENTAL" WHEN WE USE WITH THE BREAD AND WINE THE WORDS HE FIRST SPOKE OVER SIMILAR SUBSTANCES.

NOW, PERHAPS, COMES WHAT MAY APPEAR THE GREATEST WONDER OF ALL. WHEN THE WORLD WANTS TO FIND JESUS, YOU ARE THE ONE IN WHOM HE IS REVEALED. SINCE GOD TRULY TAKES UP THE FORM OF OUR WORLD TO MAKE HIMSELF KNOWN, IT FOLLOWS THAT WHEN HE MAKES YOU HIS OWN IN HOLY BAPTISM, STRENGTHENS AND MATURES YOU WITH HIS HOLY WORD, AND FEEDS AND NOURISHES YOU WITH HIS BODY AND BLOOD IN HOLY COMMUNION, THEN HE

TAKES YOUR POOR MORTAL FRAME AND TURNS IT INTO A REVELATION OF HIS PRESENCE.

OUR TEXT PLAINLY SAYS THAT ONCE GOD HAS WORKED HIS RECONCILIATION AMONG US THOROUGH THE EARTHLY MEANS OF HIS SON ON THE CROSS, HE HAS DONE IT ALL "TO PRESENT YOU HOLY IN HIS SIGHT, WITHOUT BLEMISH AND FREE FROM ACCUSATION—IF YOU CONTINUE IN YOUR FAITH, ESTABLISHED AND FIRM, NOT MOVED FROM THE HOPE HELD OUT IN THE GOSPEL. THIS IS THE GOSPEL THAT YOU HEARD" (VV 22b-23a). YOU ARE "HOLY IN [GOD'S] SIGHT, WITHOUT BLEMISH AND FREE FROM ACCUSATION" WHEN YOUR LIFE IS HIDDEN IN CHRIST. GOD IS NOT ASKING YOU TO DO THE IMPOSSIBLE, BUT RATHER TO DO WHAT HE HAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH HIS SON JESUS CHRIST. HE TELLS YOU THAT YOU ARE TO "CONTINUE IN YOUR FAITH," TAKING UP THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST INTO YOUR PERSON THROUGH HIS WORD AND SACRAMENT, AND THUS BECOMING HIS LIVING, WALKING, TALKING PRESENCE WHEREVER YOU GO. YOU ARE ASKED ONLY TO CONFESS THAT YOU HAVE BEEN UNITED WITH HIM WHO FORGIVES SINS SO THAT YOU CAN REPRESENT HIM TO OTHERS AS A SERVANT REPRESENTS THE ONE WHO OWNS HIM OR HER.

DEAR FRIENDS IN CHRIST, GOD CALLS YOU TO BE THIS EARTHLY SIGN WHEREVER YOU ARE. THUS, PEOPLE WILL KNOW THAT GOD IS PRESENT AMONG THEM. HE WILL MAKE HIMSELF KNOWN THROUGH YOU. SIMPLY OFFER YOURSELF AS A LIVING SACRIFICE



TO HIM WHO RECONCILED YOU TO HIMSELF. HE PROMISES TO DO  
THE REST. AMEN.