

Pentecost 2, Life in the Green: Three Keys to Planting Well for Eternity

Introduction: Are you alert to observe the changing colors of the seasons? I don't mean the colors of the creation — the flowers, the trees, the leaves and such. I'm talking about the changing colors of the liturgical year. It's well worth observing. Now obviously, the Altar Guild is right on top of it. They have to be. It's a critical part of their important work. But I think we should all be attentive to the thematically unfolding progression of the Liturgical Year. For the historic, liturgical expression of the Christian Church (by far the majority of Christendom) has long believed that our lives in Christ are made richer, they are enhanced as we become more carefully attentive to the seasonality of our Christian lives.

As that great Orthodox scholar Alexander Schmemmann stated so well,

“Whereas many world religions seek salvation as an escape from time, Christianity proclaims salvation as a redemption of time.”

Another more modern writer, Mark Galli, the chief editor of *Christianity Today*, in his interesting little primer on liturgical living, **Beyond Smells and Bells: The Wonder and Power of Christian Liturgy,** puts it this way,

*“[T]he liturgy is not spiritual entertainment for antiquarians. The church calendar aims at nothing less than to change the way we experience time and perceive reality. For the church, January 1 is not all that significant. Neither is September, the start of school for most of us in the West, although it may feel like the start of a “new year.” For the church, Advent signals the new year. For the church, the annual rhythm is not winter, spring, summer, and fall, but Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost (what some traditions call Ordinary time.) The church calendar is not about the cycle of life—school or sports or harvest time—but about the movement of history toward a glorious goal. **We celebrate the past events of salvation history not merely to remember them, but to note how they infuse the present with meaning and power, and point us to our future hope.**”*

Hold that thought. We’ll surely come back to it.

You might have noticed. Two weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday, the altar was beautifully draped in red. Last Sunday, on Trinity Sunday, the altar was gorgeous in its white. Today we are obviously very green. And you might not realize it but we will be green for a very long time. Indeed, we will be seeing green for roughly the next six months.

We have entered a long season called both the Season after Pentecost, or alternatively Trinitytide, which means the Season after Trinity Sunday. And this is a season marked (as we can clearly see) by this beautiful color of life, green. That green is a handy, easy reminder that we are in a season of life, growth, vitality, maturation.

So how wonderful it is as we enter into the green season, as we ponder our lives in Christ, and their growth and maturation that we should have assigned today's gospel lesson.

Liturgically, we are *transitioning* into a long liturgical season focused upon the true nature of our lives in Christ. And interestingly, Luke chapter 9 is that gospel's *transition* from Jesus' Galilean ministry into his momentous advance toward Jerusalem. And as he treads the way to Jerusalem to walk the way of the cross he will be explaining the significance of his suffering, death and resurrection with reference to the redemption of humankind, even as he unpacks the significance of the cross as the very shape of authentic discipleship.

As one commentator states,

“With the closing of the Galilean section, the central issues of Jesus’ identity and mission and the character of discipleship are on display in a way that renders necessary the more concentrated periods of discipleship instruction and formation that will characterize the journey.”

I think that is precisely right. And I suggest to you this morning that our gospel passage sets forth with crystal clarity three truths which are foundational and at the very heart of a vital, dynamic, growing Christian life —

- 1) The truth of Jesus’ identity as the anointed of the Father, the Messiah.
- 2) The truth of Jesus’ vocation as the Suffering Servant who will lay down his life as a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the world.
- 3) And thirdly, the truth that the cross is not merely a past event of history, something in the rear-view mirror of the flux of our temporal lives, but the very shape, the very nature of true discipleship as we experience it right here and right now.

Let’s briefly consider these three truths in that order.

I. First, Vital, Dynamic Christian life is grounded on a clarity of understanding about the true identity of this One we call Lord.

Lest his readers somehow miss his point, Luke has carefully structured his narrative in such a way as to make it crystal clear that the issue of the true identity of Jesus is one which deserves very serious and careful attention.

Just a few verses earlier in this same chapter, chapter 9, we read this:

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him.

And we can't help but notice that the disciples in answering Jesus' question about what the crowds were saying about him use virtually the same language,

And he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.

The crowds are tracking fairly consistently with a view of Jesus which is not as wrong as it might be, but then again certainly not entirely right or adequate.

Nobody who had any contact with Jesus seemed to imagine that He was just a regular old guy. He was clearly extraordinary. They thought he might be John or some other prophet raised from the dead. Or perhaps he was the promised eschatological Elijah who would come in the last days.

And as remarkable as these speculations were about the identity of this Jesus, they weren't right on the mark. For in one way or another they all implied that Jesus was one in a series. As one commentator notes,

“It meant that there were precedents and parallels, and that even if he stood first in rank, he was still only primus inter pares, first among his equals. But quite certainly that is not what the Christ of the New Testament claimed.”

If we are to be clear-headed in our thinking about the identity of this One we profess to follow, we must be crystal clear about his uniqueness. There has never been, there can never be another like him. He stands alone as the Father's unique and definitive provision for humanity's salvation.

So how are we to understand Peter's confession — ***“Then he said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter answered, “The Christ of God.”***

What does he mean in using such language, and what should be our understanding of its significance?

The Greek word *Christos* and its Hebrew equivalent, *Meshiach*, have a very particular semantic significance. They both mean very literally — ***One who has been anointed***. Yet the term is quite elastic in usage and can and does refer to a number of different types of anointed people.

In the Old Testament you see this language used of prophets, of priests and of kings. They were frequently anointed with oil, and thereby set apart to a particular purpose and vocation. So if we are to understand this rather elastic term rightly here in this particular context, we must do three things:

- 1) Observe where readers of Luke have already confronted the term.
- 2) Determine what the chrism or the substance of this anointing is.
- 3) Determine unto what or for what purpose or vocation Jesus has been anointed.

The first occurrence of the word *Christos* in Luke's gospel is in chapter 2 where the Angel of the Lord appears to some shepherds and says,

*Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is **Christ** the Lord.*

A few verses later in the same chapter of the old and pious Simeon we read,

*And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the **Lord's Christ**. And then he prays his famous prayer,*

*“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

In chapter 3 we read,

*As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the **Christ**, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”*

In chapter 4 we read,

*Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the **Christ**.*

So those reading Luke’s gospel closely bring to chapter 9 a certain cluster of ideas about what is meant in this context by the word Christ, or Messiah.

His coming would be a source of great joy for all people. And His birth would raise associations of the Davidic dynasty and the remarkable promises made to David about a future Davidic king whose reign would be eternal.

This messiah will be a savior, indeed more truly “the savior.” For He is the hope of salvation both for the Gentiles and for Israel.

The demonic realm, knowing Him to be the Messiah, proclaimed openly that He is “The Son of God.” Sonship language like this is resonant of OT prophecy which speaks of a future ***anointed*** descendant of David who will be God’s very Son. So Psalm 2,

*The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the Lord and against ***His Anointed***, saying,
“Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.”
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
Then He will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,*

*“As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.”*

I will tell of the decree:

*The Lord said to me, “You are **my Son**;
today I have begotten you.*

So these are the ideas naturally hovering around the word *Christ* which Peter uses in his famous confession. The careful reader of Luke’s gospel brings these associations with him in the hearing of the word.

But one who is anointed must be anointed with something. What is the chrism or the substance of Jesus’ anointing? Luke’s gospel leaves no doubt on this point.

From Luke 3,

*Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and **the Holy Spirit** descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*

Then Luke interjects his genealogy. Then 4 begins this way,

*And Jesus, **full of the Holy Spirit**, returned from the Jordan and was **led by the Spirit** in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil.*

Then, of course, is the temptation. Following the temptation account we read,

*And Jesus returned **in the power of the Spirit** to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.*

The very next event in Luke involves Jesus coming to His hometown and preaching His first sermon there. This is a paradigmatic statement in Luke's gospel.

In that synagogue in Nazareth He opens the scroll and reads from Isaiah 61 these words,

***"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,**
because he has anointed me
*to proclaim good news to the poor.**

*He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

Do you remember how Jesus concludes that reading from Isaiah 61?

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This Christ, this Messiah, this Anointed One who was born to the acclaim of angels in Bethlehem has been anointed by the Father with the Spirit of God at his baptism. And His launching and conducting His public ministry under the guidance and empowering of that Spirit represents the arrival of the Day of Salvation, the day of fulfillment.

Summary: So first, vital, dynamic Christian life and growth in that life are utterly impossible for those who are unclear about the identity of this One we call Lord. Jesus is not merely someone we admire and seek to emulate, Jesus is the One we worship. He is the only hope for the world, the only means of salvation. And as the fullness of the Biblical revelation will make so clear, he is actually God Incarnate.

II. But secondly, a clear grasp of the identity of this Anointed One, this Son of God, this Savior of the World must be conjoined with a clear understanding of his vocation. For He has come from heaven into this world to be the Suffering Servant who will suffer and die as a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of others.

Virtually everyone in the world would have been ready to embrace and follow a Messiah with the powers Jesus has already demonstrated in his ministry, but it is almost inconceivable that this Anointed One would or should suffer and die as Jesus did. This is the great offense at the heart of the Christian gospel — not a powerful and conquering Messiah, but a Suffering Messiah who would be killed by his enemies. Unthinkable!

The event which immediately precedes our passage in Luke is the feeding of the 5000. That was an amazing miracle which raised astonishing implications about the utopian possibilities of following this mighty wonder-worker. In fact, in John's account of the feeding of the 5000 one reads this final statement,

When the people saw the sign that He had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"

Perceiving then that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

An Anointed King, the eschatological Prophet like Moses, one who could with ease supernaturally feed the people, that was what they wanted in a Messiah. That would work. That would be perfect. And with those hopes and expectations they were thinking of forcing Him to be their king.

But Jesus' clarification of his vocation here shatters all such triumphalistic and utopian views of what it might mean to follow him.

And he strictly charged and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

In the inner sanctum of the Father's redemptive mystery that Jesus' suffering, rejection and death might not be merely an unspeakable tragedy but the very means of the Father's being reconciled with sinners, there lies the stumbling block to the world's acceptance of Jesus' messiahship. They were looking for a conquering Prince who would defeat the Romans and establish an international order centered in Jerusalem.

It was to be a day of triumph, peace, prosperity, and boundless resources. Jesus' being crushed by his enemies did not fit into this view of Messiahship at all. That is surely one reason He sharply told them not to tell anyone what Peter has just said. It's not that it's false. It's just that it can't possibly be understood rightly at this point. It's just not what people had in mind when they thought about the Coming Anointed One.

Now after the resurrection, when the reality of the cross has shattered their delusional notions of Messiahship and the resurrection has dispelled their fears that perhaps the light of goodness has been vanquished by the darkness of evil, He speaks very openly about the necessity of the Messiah suffering in this way.

So in Luke 24, on the road to Emmaus,

And He said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Or a few verses later in the final resurrection appearance in Luke,

Then He said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

It was more than difficult, it was borderline impossible to understand the notion of the Messiah experiencing the suffering and death of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah - until the cross and the resurrection blew away that fog and permitted them to see the Scriptures rightly for the first time.

And frankly, there just wasn't any interest in a Messiah who would be crushed by evil; He was supposed to be the one doing the crushing.

But those who follow Jesus as Lord must not only be clear-headed about His identity as the unique and anointed one, but must make peace with the shocking character of his vocation as the Suffering Servant.

III. Thirdly and lastly, in our remarkable passage Jesus sets forth for the first time with rare clarity the fact that the cross will not merely be His experience in Jerusalem, but it would be the daily experience of those who choose to follow him. The very shape of Christian discipleship is shown to be cruciform.

And He said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.

What is the meaning of this paradox that those who cling to life lose it while those who willingly lose their lives for his sake will preserve it, or save it?

Make no mistake, Jesus is extending to his disciples the charge to die, to die voluntarily and then consequently to really live. It is required that we as the followers of Jesus must release or give over that which we so desperately and instinctively cling to, our lives, in order to save them.

Illustration: Let me illustrate with a miniature example of this huge truth. When I was a boy my entire family would go up to our Baptist Church every Monday evening for vigorous volleyball. As theological descendants of Menno Simons,

Anabaptists are supposed to be lovers of peace. But I can tell you that volleyball as this group of Baptist maniacs played it was definitely a blood sport. Well, being tall, I was a natural spiker and loved to hit the ball off my fist like a cannon shot. Well, one Monday night, a setter on the back row hit a ball right toward me which I was going to spike right down the throat of the team on the other side of the net when this foolish old man, Mr. Blankenship, decided that he would take the set and spike it himself. (Now this was madness. Mr. Blankenship was no spiker, and I was a beast. He should never have had any thoughts of taking that ball rather than letting me have it.) Anyway, we both jumped up to get the ball. We had a mighty collision. He outweighed me by 50 pounds so he sent me flying to the floor where I landed on my back like a ton of bricks. I soon discovered that I was entirely unable to breathe. After a minute or so of being unable to breathe I realized that he had killed me. So strangely my murderer, Mr. Blankenship, gets down beside me and yells in my ear, ***“Bill, quit trying to breathe.”*** There were only two things in the world I wanted to do at that moment — to punch the man who had killed me in the face, and to take a long, deep breath of the air I so desperately needed. Well, shortly I started to black out and upon losing full consciousness quit the desperate gasping for air and started to breathe smoothly and normally once again.

It had been my desperate, terribly urgent gasping attempts to breathe which had kept my diaphragm locked up and made it impossible to breathe. So to breathe, I really had to quit trying to breathe.

That's a pale shadow of a spiritual principle that runs deep into our spiritual lives. Until we quit trying to dictate, control, and direct the purpose and meaning of our lives, our lives remain locked up in futility, without any real purpose. The significance of our lives with respect to the Lord's eternal kingdom is inversely related to the extent that we attempt to establish that significance on our own terms. So as we desperately cling to our lives as we conceive them, as we intend them, then they remain lost to us.

We must die in order to truly live.

Or thinking once again of our being in the Green season of life, vitality, fecundity and maturity, we would do well to remember the Lord's statement about that which must precede the eternal harvest.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

If we are, during this Green season of life - to experience the spiritual growth, the fruitfulness, the maturation which is normal where there is robust life and health - we must be firmly grounded in the identity of our Lord as God's Anointed One, His Son, the Hope of the World, the Savior of the World. We must be clear that this One came to fulfill the vocation of the suffering servant whose death would pay for our sins. And we must recognize that the cross is not only the place where Jesus took care of our sin problem once and for all (it is surely that). But it is also the ongoing and timeless shape of the life of authentic discipleship. And the daily death to self our cross requires promises a life beyond our wildest imaginings. Those not thinking deeply about the matter might imagine that the Lord requires too much of his disciples. I mean, who wants to die? But in truth it is just as that missionary and martyr Jim Elliot once stated,

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Amen.

Sermon given by Fr. Robert William Dickson on June 23, 2019

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