

Rogate

Numbers 21:4-9; James 1:22-27; John 16:23-33

May 17, 2020

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

“Whatever people do out of good intentions, this is pleasing to God.”

“When people try their best, God is satisfied.”

These statements are contrary to the Gospel. It imagines there are two ways to be saved: one through grace—God’s forgiveness; and the other through works—man doing his best.

But from the beginning of the world, people have been saved in the same way: through the Gospel, the promises of God. When Jesus appears to a pair of His disciples on Easter evening, Jesus shows them that the entire Old Testament was preparation for His suffering and resurrection. **“Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself”** (Lk 24:26-27).

Today’s Old Testament reading Jesus directly links to Himself: **“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”** (Jn 3:14-15).

To signs like the serpent on the pole, God attached His Word and Promise. The object—the serpent on the pole—was not endowed with some kind of magic. It was a visible word. That’s how God works with us: He gives us His Word – and so we can grasp it more easily, He attaches that Word to certain objects. The objects then have the promise of the Word. So we hear the Word, but we are also splashed with the Word, we chew the Word, we drink the Word. God does this for our benefit, so that all of our senses can apprehend His gifts.

And Christians have from the beginning used a liturgy so that by repetition we learn what we need to know about Christ. Through participation, we memorize God's Word. Thus you know well the passage, **"If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."** "We deceive ourselves."

When no one else was available, I used to play strategy board games against myself, playing both sides. Strangely enough, I had trouble tricking my opponent.

Thus it seems like it would be difficult to deceive yourself. Yet the same idea appears in today's epistle reading from James: **"Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."** How do people deceive themselves? Kevin Vanhoozer puts it this way: "People tell lies to themselves in order to hide from themselves the knowledge of God and especially the knowledge of themselves as sinners before God" (*Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, 94). What lies are you telling yourself? I know for me, one of the terrifying parts of going to individual confession is that the pastor will learn just what a wretched sinner I am. I know intellectually that I am a sinner, but I don't really want to face it. I'd prefer people think of me as better than I really am; and I'd prefer to think of myself as better than I really am. "People tell lies to themselves." What lies do you need to come clean about?

I've found that I can couch my own sins against the Eight Commandment ("You shall not give false testimony about your neighbor") as expressing "concern" or "disappointment" about someone instead of what it really is: harming my neighbor's reputation with my words. St. James sees right through that nonsense. "Bridle your tongue!" he tells us.

Martin Chemnitz, the great systematizer of Reformation theology, teaches that virtues flow from the Commandments: "A second general virtue under the Eighth Commandment is the careful use of the tongue, concerning which many passages in Scripture instruct us. The commonly mentioned virtues in this category are quietness, courteousness, friendliness" (*Loci*

Theologici). Whereas James tells us to bridle our tongue—the bridle being a bit in the mouth of an animal to guide it—the Psalms teach us to set a guard over our mouth. And the Lord Jesus tells us that every idle word will have to be accounted for in the judgment. That should terrify us.

How can we reconcile what James says—that we should not just be hearers of the Word but doers—with teachings elsewhere in Scripture that say it is faith that saves us, not our doing? This little phrase is helpful: Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone. A person with genuine faith sees his sin, repents, and strives to become new and different.

And that's where our prayers come in. Today is called *Rogate*, a Latin term meaning "ask." That's what our prayers are: we are asking things from the Father. Prayer seems easy, but it actually is quite difficult. The difficulty comes in depending upon it, believing that God hears and will answer. You learned from the *Catechism* that "Amen" means, "Yes, yes, it shall be so." Isn't it difficult to ask for something and then say with confidence, "Yes, yes, it shall be so"?

This is because our heart thinks prayer depends upon us. There must be something in my praying, my words, my sincerity and devotion, that will make the prayer effective.

But Jesus in today's Gospel points us in a different direction. He says, **"Whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you."** What does it mean to ask in the name of Jesus?

It means, first of all, that I am not the one praying, not alone. In other words, I am not coming before the Father with my own works, or bargains, or even my own vocabulary, as though if I can just craft the right words I can get God to give me what I want. No, we pray in the name of Jesus, meaning, we pray "*Our Father*," where the Father is first of all the Father of Jesus. I only get to call God Father because Jesus has made Himself my Brother. Only Jesus is righteous. Only He has paid for sins. Only Jesus has rightly fasted, purely suffered, conquered temptation, defeated the devil. I

didn't do those things. So my praying won't be worth much of anything. But this Jesus, His asking, His praying is heard by the Father. Praying in the name of Jesus is my access to the Father.

And that also means I'm going to ask for what Jesus would have me ask for. Not what will glorify me, but what will make me a better Christian. Should I pray for an expensive sports car – or for help with my greed? Should I pray for the downfall of my enemies – or with help loving them? You see, praying in the name of Jesus involves asking for what He taught us is important.

Jesus models for us right prayer in the High Priestly Prayer, which is what we call the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane before His arrest. Jesus states what He wants—He wishes to avoid the cross—but He submits Himself to the Father's will: “Nevertheless not as I will, but as You will.”

This is a giving over of the self to God, a complete submission to the Father's will. It is a belief that He is doing what is for my good, even if I can't see it now.

Dear saints, we are not promised a wonderfully luxurious and prosperous life here on this earth. Praying for that denies the fallen condition of this world. We aren't looking for a little remodeling, as though some granite countertops and new paint can spruce it up. We dwell in a house of death. There are no cosmetic fixes. A pandemic has been upon the world since our parents first grasped for fruit forbidden.

Our prayer is for rescue, ransom, redemption, resurrection. That comes through Jesus. **“These things I have spoken to you,”** He says, **“that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”** +INJ+

In the Name of + Jesus

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.