

Hard Truth for Good Reason

It's difficult to hear the lessons for today *and not have all the red flags raised and all the alarms in your head sounding off*. Peter speaks of the end of all things being at hand, and it's hard to argue, isn't it? Jesus speaks of the faithful being tossed out/locked out of worship. We've seen that in spades over the past year, haven't we? There's a pastor in Canada sitting in jail today because last week he dared to "incite people to attend church." "*They will do these things because they have not known the Father or Me.*" **Yep. That's a dead-ringer for today!** Jesus also warns very plainly that the coming persecutions will even include murder, and worse yet, the murderous persecutions will be committed by people *who actually believe they're serving God by committing murder*. Well... you don't have to look far today to see that, do you? Understand: I'm not talking about the murderous anti-Christian regimes like China or North Korea. I'm not talking about murderous terror hot-beds like Nigeria or the Middle East. Just look at what passes for politics and women's "reproductive healthcare" nowadays in our own "Christian Nation," *and this by self-professed "good Christians" and "good Catholics" who legislate for it, fund it, and who condone it with their votes, firmly believing they are good Catholics and good Christians, serving God and serving their neighbor with their murderous ways.* "*They will do these things because they have not known the Father or Me.*" Yep. That's a dead-ringer for today. As I said, it's difficult to hear the words of our lessons today and not be alarmed.

But here's the thing: *That's not really the point of these lessons. I know you may find that difficult to believe, but it's true.* "*I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.*" **There it is!** And pay careful attention: Jesus **NEVER** sugar-coats anything. He never tells them that bad things may possibly happen to them throughout the course of their earthly ministries. Nope! All this evil **WILL** happen, and when it does... "*I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.*" He's still saying these same things to us today. Besides all this, the end has *already* begun with the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. **We are living in the end of days,** and it's been this way since Jesus first declared "*It is finished!*" from His cross. This is called "*inaugurated eschatology,*" which is just a fancy way of saying "the beginning of the end." All those end-time prophecies in the Old Testament about darkness blotting out the sun and earthquakes and rocks splitting and dead people rising (ref. Joel, Amos, et al)... *that all took place on Good Friday* as God Himself was dying for our sins. So... yes, we're living in the end of days. "*I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away.*"

Folks: There's a reason this particular lesson is appointed for the first Sunday after the ascension (long before any of the garbage we're witnessing today was even around). Like the book of Acts tells us, on that ascension mount Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took Him out of sight. Just consider how Jesus Himself was treated when He walked this earth and people beheld Him with their own eyes [*the crucifix*]. **Do you honestly think things would improve once He's no longer seen?** And take careful note on how I worded this. "No longer seen" is not the same as "absent" or "no longer present."

I want you to think about those first martyrs—the apostles to whom Jesus first spoke these words. Remember that on that ascension mount—a full forty days after the resurrection—these guys *still* didn't get it. They were still asking Jesus if He was now going to pull the trigger and usher in the great worldly empire they had been imagining and expecting. "*My kingdom is not of this world!*" The angel's question to these men after seeing Jesus taken from their sight says it all: "*Why are you looking into the heavens?*" They thought that was it. **Jesus was gone now. They were now all alone and on their own.** It was only after the working of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (where they were fearfully gathered in an upper room—again—behind doors and out of sight) that they were finally able to understand. The Holy Spirit opened their eyes and ears of faith so that they could confidently and fearlessly behold and hold fast to Christ and His sacramental promise: "*I am with you always.*"

So... what's so different with us today? **NOTHING!** Our Lord *continues* to send His Holy Spirit to work and nurture that same confidence and fearlessness of saving faith in us, ***even in the midst of our tumults, trials, and tribulations... just like He promised.*** This same Holy Spirit continues to open our eyes and ears of faith to see and hear and hold fast to the very same Word and Sacraments—the very same real and truly present Christ—that those first apostolic martyrs did so many centuries ago. There's nothing new under the sun, both in terms of persecution and salvation. Look around! Christ isn't gone! He's not absent! **He's just hidden from our sight. He's hidden in plain sight.** "*I have said all this so that you don't fall away.*"

Where do you look when the struggles and tribulations and persecutions come; ***when your faith is being put to the test and beat down?*** And let's face it: We get it on all sides, don't we? Sickness? Pain? Loss of job? Loss of friendships? Loss of loved ones? This time two years ago the weather was against us and we were covered over in record flood waters. ***This past year? These past couple of months?*** Well... you know how faith is being beat down and put to the test. Where do you look in these dark and uncertain times? Where do you flee? To what/whom do you flee? What are you looking for? I know the "right" answer is "Jesus," but is that true for you? ***Be careful! Your Lord knows the Truth!***

Where is Jesus? Answer: Right where He promises to be. Right where He tells us to look and listen and hold fast. *“I have said these things so that you don’t fall away.”* Look to this cross. I know this is something that happened in the past almost two thousand years ago. We can’t go back to that day and hold fast to that bloody cross. ***This is why Christ brings the victory of His cross and His resurrection to us!*** Look no further than the font; the baptism that He Himself baptized you with, for it is here in the waters of Holy Baptism (like Ezekiel says) that Almighty God gave you a new heart and new spirit. It’s here that He cleansed you from all uncleanness; from the death sentence of sin. It’s here that He put His Holy Spirit within you and made you His own, putting His triune name upon your head and your heart, making Christ’s victory your victory. You belong to Him, and not even the gates of hell can prevail against this.

This same God and Lord has also promised to be with us always, for our forgiveness, our assurance, our peace. *“Take and eat. Take and drink. As often as you do this, remember what I have said. This is My body. This is My blood. I am with you always, even to the end of the age. I have said these things so that you won’t fall away.”* Folks: Look to this altar. Look to this pulpit and lectern. ***Look and listen.*** Here is your Lord, keeping His promise! Your Lord is not absent. He’s not in quarantine or social-distancing from you. ***He’s not even “unseen.”*** He’s just recognized through the eyes of faith; eyes no different than those faithful martyrs had; eyes that are opened through the working of the Holy Spirit—the Helper—so that we do not lose faith or fall away in “little faith.” *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the Words of eternal life.”* This is the faithful confession of ***saints and martyrs***, in any day, any place, and any circumstance.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I don’t know what the future holds for us on this side of eternity. Maybe it will get better. Maybe this is as good as it ever gets. Maybe it will get worse. ***Whatever the case, through it all, our Lord is with us, right where He promises to be—His Word and His sacraments.*** Through persecutions, through dark and terrifying storms, in the very midst of pain and sickness and ***fear of sickness*** and anxiety and loss—richer, poorer, sickness, health, good times, bad times, for better and for worse—**our Lord is with us**, and where our Lord is there is peace; a peace the world does not know, cannot give, and can never take away. ***My friends: Here is this peace, for you, so that you may never fall away.*** Your Immanuel Lord draws near to you and abides with you so that you may never fall away from Him. May this Christ-centered grace and peace; this real and sacramental Truth, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Him, now and into all eternity.

AMEN