

Week of Easter 7

Wednesday, 20 May 2015

Lutheran Theological Seminary in Tshwane (LTS Pretoria, South Africa)

Text: 1 Corinthians 2:11-16

Theme: Spiritual by the Spirit

In the Gospel reading for the week, we hear Jesus preparing His disciples for what is to come. That night, the night He was delivered up, He promised the disciples in the upper room that the Holy Spirit would come to them. In the Gospel of Luke, as Jesus led His disciples to the Mount of Olives, He instructed them to remain in Jerusalem until they receive power from on high, power that is of the Holy Spirit.

Why would He make that promise? Wasn't it enough that they had heard Him teach them about the Kingdom? Hadn't they heard His message themselves? Were they not able to testify under their own strength about what He had done?

Well, the answer to all of those questions was clearly "No." As we look at the record in the Gospel accounts, it is quite clear that on their own they just didn't get it. They did not understand. They might get part of it, but it seemed there was always something missing. When they were in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus challenged them with the question, "Who do you say that I am." And Simon Peter answered that question correctly: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But even this was not of His own doing, for as Jesus noted, this was revealed by the Father who is in heaven. Yet what happened immediately after that showed that Peter did not fully understand Jesus and His purpose. For when Jesus said that He must suffer and die, Peter said, "Never!" In spite of His great confession, he was labelled "Satan," the adversary, because He actually set himself against Christ and the reason for which He came. It is interesting that Peter's attempt to dissuade Jesus from His mission parallels Satan's temptations at the beginning of Jesus' ministry: the temptation to be crowned with glory without going through the cross. He could not truly be the messianic King without also being the Suffering Servant.

As Paul talks about the Spirit in our reading, we see clearly that the full truth of Christ can only be understood by means of the Spirit. Over and over again we have heard and learned: we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord. This is a gift of God. Philosophical arguments create gods in the image of the philosopher, or gods that the philosopher can reject. Our God, the true God, operates by the foolishness of the Gospel, through Christ crucified, who is the one the builders rejected (whether the Jewish builders who wanted an exclusively kingly, powerful Messiah, or the Greek philosophical builders of a God who is, but who is merely a philosophical abstract, not the living God who has created and redeemed us to have a relationship with Him). These arguments appeal to the natural man, but the man who has received the Spirit.

Paul tells us that the truth is spiritually discerned, that only the spiritual person can understand this. But we need to be careful here, for that word “spiritual” is one that is often misused and misunderstood in our day. We need to be especially careful to properly understand Paul’s words that the one who is “spiritual” is judged by no man. Even the word “spiritual” as used these days can be used in a prideful manner, as in “I am not religious, but I am a spiritual person.” And such people often refuse to be judged by anyone, to their detriment! They know what they believe and they have a right to their own ideas, and no one can tell them otherwise. So we are warned to test the spirits to see if they are from God! Test them by God’s Word! We who are spiritual may be judged by no one, but we are judged by the Word of God, by which the Spirit of God, the true Spirit, leads us into the truth.)

We need to take these words to heart ourselves, for the one who is preparing for ministry may become puffed up with His own knowledge. I have often said that no one is more dangerous to the church than a person who has had one year of seminary. The knowledge that they have gained makes them enthusiastic, but it also creates the temptation to show off that knowledge, often in a prideful manner to the detriment of others. It takes more seasoning to develop the proper humility that creates a true servant. To think that we may be spiritual, or more spiritual than others, and not liable to be judged, may lead us into spiritual danger. We, too, continually need to test the spirits to see that the spirit we are being led by is in fact the Holy Spirit.

We are called upon to have the mind of Christ. What does this mean? Such a mind can only come from the Spirit who reveals it to us. It is a mind that does not trust in one’s own self, that does not look to its own resources, but which empties itself in submission to the one who has revealed Himself to us. The mind of Christ is the way of the cross. It is the way of self-denial, a way that leads through the valley of the shadow of death, but which ends with being crowned with glory and honor, not as a right, not as something earned, but as a gift of God which is acknowledged as such. May God bless us through the study of His Word, that we might be blessed with the mind of Christ, and that we might rejoice in this gift to us and use it for His service. Amen.

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