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The Third Sunday after Easter

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THE FOURTH WORD/ BIBLE & CRUCIFIX

THE FOURTH WORD

Faith Forsaken and Forsaking

Christ's Fourth Word from the Cross is the terrible cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). This is a cry de profundis, from the depths of darkness and desolation, of the one who though himself without sin yet experiences in himself the fullness of our sin's alienation from God, who takes upon himself the burden of our condemnation. At the same time, it is the cry of purest faith, for he calls upon "my God". And so this point of furthest remove from God is also the turning point, the point of the Son's return to the Father, where sorrow passes over into joy, and curse gives way to blessing.

In the gospel lesson for this third Sunday after Easter, (the first of several from the Last Supper discourses) Jesus warns his disciples about the desolation they will experience when he dies. "Ye shall have sorrow" he warns them, "but your sorrows shall be turned into joy". These sorrows are the birthpangs of the new life, and that passing over from sorrow to joy, is the meaning of our life in the world, as "strangers and pilgrims". Forsaking "fleshly lusts, which war against the soul", we pass over to the joy of a faith which looks beyond the desolations of worldly hopes to the changeless and eternal good of God revealed in the Resurrection. "O be joyful in God, all ye lands, alleluia: sing ye praises unto the honour of his Name, alleluia: make his praise to be exceeding glorious, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia (Introit. Psalm 66. Jubilate Deo.).

BIBLE & CRUCIFIX

On Low Sunday we dedicated two gifts for our refurbished chapel – a Lectern Bible (King James, of course, with Apocrypha), given in memory of Col. & Mrs. Paul Troxler, and a Crucifix, given in memory of Dr. & Mrs. Ralph O. Bowden. To think about what these gifts mean, is to think about the Reformed (or Protestant) and Catholic legacy of Anglicanism. Very often, these are regarded as mutually exclusive and contradictory categories, and certainly many Catholics and evangelicals often speak that way. The differences are real: but they are not the whole picture, and Anglicans, who know themselves as Christians both

reformed and catholic, should know this better.

Because the basis of Christian faith is essentially the word of witness faithfully set forth in the Holy Scriptures, this word written is the great treasure of the Christian tradition. One of the primary achievements of the English reformation was the recovery of the Bible, after a long period when the clergy had sought to restrict access to the Scriptures. Renaissance humanism allowed its translation out of the original languages into noble English, the new technology of the printing press allowed its publication, the order of the Christian state had a copy installed in every church, and read aloud morning and evening every day, in a society hungry to hear and receive the Word of God. Yet one must also say that the Bible prized by the Protestant reformers is the Bible canonized by Catholic Christianity; and that the reading and preaching of Scripture recovered by the Reformers was central to ancient Catholic tradition.

When we turn to consider the beautiful crucifix made for us by Wippell's, we may think of this as distinctively "Catholic". Certainly the use of the altar crucifix has been a feature of catholic liturgy since the Middle Ages, which most reformed churches, including the Church of England, abolished in the sixteenth century. One should note, however, that Lutherans (the first Protestants) retained the crucifix, and Queen Elizabeth I kept crucifix and candles in the royal chapel, to the scandal of her bishops and deans.

When ornaments came back into use in the 19th century, it was usually the empty cross, not the crucifix with its image of the Crucified. One sometimes hears rather dubious theological arguments built upon that difference – the notion, for instance, that the empty cross shows that we worship a living Lord – as if the crucifix means that Catholics worship a dead one. But the Reformers would have laughed such a distinction out of court. They affirmed in words what the crucifix shows forth in image, that it is only through the death of Christ that we enter into life with God, only through the suffering of the crucified that we pass over into the joy of his resurrection. The sacrifice of Christ lies at the very centre of our faith and worship.

The word of witness – "we have seen the Lord" – is the indispensable basis of our faith. And yet, like Thomas, in our weakness, we may need more help: we may need witness visible and tangible as well as audible, to raise us up from the death of doubt to the life of faith. These visible and audible witnesses are primarily the Sacraments – but why stop there? We need all the help we can get! And thus in the church's worship we harness every sense to the Word of God – hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, even smelling. "In his temple doth everything speak of his glory".

GGD

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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