

First Fruits

St. Paul has been called the first Christian theologian. Obviously there were other Christians preaching and teaching the gospel before, during, and after Paul's evangelistic ministry. Yet it pleased the Holy Spirit and the Church that Paul's confession of the faith, and his explanation of it, should be preserved in Holy Scripture and become normative for the Christian Church in all times and places. This morning we will expound upon Paul's message to the Colossians regarding the atoning death of Christ and his resurrection, and what they mean for us.

Paul was born and raised a devout Jew. He joined the party of the Pharisees, a particularly strict and zealous group within Judaism. And Paul was a rabbi, a recognized and respected teacher of the Law. As a devout Jew and rabbi, Paul knew well and believed the Hebrew Scriptures, what we would the Old Testament of our Bible. As a Pharisee, he was also waiting expectantly for the coming of the Messiah. Therefore, Paul would have also known very well the Old Testament prophecies and foreshadowing of the coming of God's Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ.

Once Jesus was revealed to Paul as the promised Christ, and Paul came to have faith in him as such, Paul could have easily put together the pieces of the Old Testament that predicted events in the actual life of Jesus. Whereas Paul wrote and ministered before the gospels themselves were probably written, Paul no doubt had an effect on the ways Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John told their stories of Jesus' life. The gospels and Paul's letters are full of references to Old Testament prophecies fulfilled by Christ.

Central to Paul's theology, and central in the gospels, is the death and resurrection of Christ. In the passage selected for today, Paul describes Jesus as "the firstborn from the dead... making peace through the blood of his cross." Paul goes on to write, "And you

who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death.” In other words, Paul is saying that Christ is the atoning sacrifice that makes us acceptable to God. We ourselves participate in the both the suffering of Christ’s crucifixion and the glory of his rising from the tomb. Christ is the first fruits, the first to rise from the grave, and we shall all be raised with him one day as well.

Christ’s resurrection, and our resurrection, is foreshadowed in the Old Testament in many ways, but one way in particular, one that is especially relevant to this reading from Colossians, is on my mind today. We are familiar with the animal sacrifices that were mandated in the Old Testament. Lambs, goats, oxen, and even birds were ritually killed on the altar in the Temple as an offering to God. It is easy to draw comparisons between these bloody sacrifices of animals and Jesus’ gory death on the cross.

But what do you make of the first fruit offering found in Leviticus, chapter 23, verses 10 and 11? God gives these instructions to Moses there: "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath.'”

Now that verse about a priest waving a sheaf of grain before the altar might seem pretty foreign and alien to us. We might think, ” That’s a disposable part of the bible if there ever was one. Totally irrelevant; that’s got nothing to do with me.” But we would be so very, very wrong! Every word of scripture has something to do with us. God did not waste one inspired word of Holy Writ. None of them can just be written off. At our latest synod assembly, during one of the debates, a pastor got up and read a list of all the parts of the Bible she said we don’t believe anymore. Well, maybe she doesn’t believe them. I wanted to say to her, “Don’t you know we are not to judge scripture, scripture judges us?”

So what does this obscure Jewish wheat waving ritual found in Leviticus have to do with us 21st century Christians? Answer: It is the perfect picture of Christ's death and resurrection, and it explains how Christ grants us salvation and new life. To wit, the night before his crucifixion, Jesus said to his disciples, referring to himself, "Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 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." Do you think it was mere coincidence that Jesus referred to himself as a grain of wheat or did he have Leviticus 23 in mind? Do you think Jewish rabbi Jesus who bested the Pharisees didn't know as much about the Old Testament as Jewish rabbi and Pharisee Paul? I don't think so.

The analogy is crystal clear. Just as the first fruit offering was the first full grain to arise out the earth at harvest time, so was Jesus the first human being resurrected from the earth to eternal life. Just as the first fruit offering was made on behalf of the Israelite people, to free them from their sin, so was Jesus sacrificed on our behalf to free us from our sin. Want more? The first fruit sacrifice was made "the day after the Sabbath," that is the day after Saturday, which is Sunday. When did Jesus rise from the dead? Sunday! Bingo! See how much we would lose if we said we didn't believe Leviticus anymore. See how much poorer we would be if we just threw out the Old Testament. We have to have the Old Testament to illuminate the New. It's all relevant.

But that's not all we need to say about the first fruits analogy: While a stalk of wheat, or a tomato in your garden for that matter, grows from a single seed, when it produces fruit, each fruit has many seeds. Think of how many seeds are in a tomato and how many tomatoes grow on a bush. That's a lot of seeds from one seed. In a similar way, when Christ was raised from the dead he did not really rise alone; all those who are in Christ rise with him.

Our resurrection is a promise we look forward to in the future. But how do we know it's real? How can we be sure it's going to happen for us? Answer: We can be sure it's going to happen to us because it has already happened to others. There's another little passage of scripture that often gets overlooked these days. It's another one of those odd little stories that a lot of people don't believe anymore, but there it is right there in the Bible, providing the perfect exclamation point to this connection between first fruit offerings and Jesus' death and resurrection.

Here is what St. Matthew has to report about Jesus' death in chapter 27, verses 50 to 53, of his gospel: "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people."

When Jesus died and was raised from the dead he brought others to life with him. He did not rise alone. Other people were raised with him. That's what the Bible tells us. Do we believe it? Do we judge scripture or does scripture judge us? Will we sit at Jesus' feet and learn from his Word like Mary in the gospel reading, or will we be judge over the Lord?

Two logical questions arise over this appearance of those who were resurrected at the same time as Christ. Were all the holy people who died before Christ raised? Answer: Apparently not; only some were. Well, what eventually happened to them? Answer: they probably ascended with Christ. The full scriptural reasoning for these conclusions is beyond our scope this morning, but hopefully the main point is certain: Every little detail of scripture reveals Christ as our Savior. He died for us. He rose again. And he is coming back in love for us. We too will rise again. We can trust in him. To do so is sweet delight. Amen.