

Sermon for Vespers on August 21, 2007
2007 General Retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity

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Text: Mark 8:22-33

[Spit in hands. Rub in eyes. Peer around the room]

It is as I have grown older, now nearing my 60th birthday, that I have come to value the gift of sight more and more. The images, once so bright, so sharp, so memorable are now harder to make out. Those large highway signs now must wait until I get a little closer to be sure that this is my exit. The prayers at the Eucharistic table never seem to be quite spoken as they are printed — blame it on those tri-focals. And to the question, "What, they don't make anything larger than a 19-inch screen for my computer?" my parish administrator simply shakes her head. To see now is harder than it used to be. But then I am at least grateful for the gift of sight at all, grateful for the sun, moon and stars, the faces of those I love, the images that will become part of my memory. To walk in darkness cannot be easy, although many accomplish it without a murmur or complaint or even a cry of despair. So I am thankful for my sight, poor as it is at times, grateful that I can see at all.

It is partly to bring sight to the blind, as the prophet of old had promised, that this Jesus had come. It is for this reason that friends bring the blind man to Him, that He might lay His hands on him and cure him. And it would need to be a cure, a complete cure, for there are no vocational rehabilitation programs in place to support this man with his disability. It is with the spit of His own mouth and the touch of His own hands, that Jesus begins the healing. "Can you see?" he asks. Peering out, it is as though the man is old, with watery, rheumy, cataract infested eyes. Yes, he can see, but vaguely, faintly, not clearly. So with the intensity of His own sight, as though to gaze into the depths of this man's very being, Jesus lays His hands on him again, bringing to him the healing that only the Lord can bring. What joy there is to see everything clearly! What excitement to see faces smiling, people laughing, friends clapping. Rejoice, for that which I did not have is now given to me. But Jesus has not come to simply be a worker of miracles. He has not come so that the world may view Him as some kind of wonder worker, performing tricks on the stage like some Benny Hinn of old. There is yet other work to do, other sight to restore, and for that He must continue on His journey.

"When they look at me, who do people see in me? Who do they say that I am?" Jesus asks His disciples. It is through human eyes that the answers come pouring out of their mouths, a jumble of names and roles, a list of all the usual suspects — prophets and baptizers, those who were famous and others less well known. "But you! Who do you see? Who do you say that I am?" It is brash Peter, never one to hold back even if it meant putting both feet in his mouth, it is Peter who answers now with the eyes of faith. I see the Messiah, the anointed One of God. In a moment of clarity such as he has not had until now, it is through the eyes of faith, that Peter sees this Jesus for who He is, what He is. There is no prevarication, no tremor of uncertainty, no momentary pause of questioning. Right in there with both feet, for better or worse. You are the Messiah of God, from God. There is no other. The God who is hidden is now revealed in faith.

Such seeing with eyes of faith is a gift, a gift which has been given to us as well. By myself, with my own eyes, I cannot see this Jesus, cannot know who He is. It is the Spirit, as Luther tells us clearly his explanation to the third article of the Creed, it is the Spirit who leads us to see this Jesus, to name and proclaim Him to be the Christ, the Lord. Like the blind man of old, hands are laid on our heads as well, heads still wet with the water of the font poured out upon us, imparting the gift of the Spirit to us. And it is that same Spirit power which moves among us, working where and when it will, as the life giving Word is preached and proclaimed in our ears. Water and Word! These signs, these assurances, these very marks of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, these are the means by which the Spirit is poured out upon us so that we might come to know this Jesus, to see Him with eyes of faith, to proclaim Him to be the Messiah of God.

[Spit in hands. Rub in eyes. Peer around the room]

But even as I see, I do not see. Even as I look, my frail, failing, sin-filled eyes let me down again. And even if I could see I do not want to see. For there, laid before me, is something that my eyes do not wish to behold, something too difficult to comprehend as though my very eyes cannot believe that which stands before me. Yet it is large, so large that I cannot avoid seeing it, so dominant that even my old eyes cannot miss it. It is the Cross which stands before me, casting its shadow over me. There is no turning away, for that cross goes before me at every turn; indeed it is inscribed upon my very forehead to remind me daily of its power over me and in me. It is to that cross that Jesus now turns, leading His disciples upon this path which will end in suffering, rejection and death. As an instrument of humiliation, of torture, of pain and of death, used for the most common of criminals, that cross with its suffering and pain was not what the disciples had expected for their Messiah. Yet it is to that cross that Jesus now turns. It is to that cross that Jesus will shortly summon His disciples, inviting them to take up their cross and follow Him. It is to that cross that Jesus must now journey toward Jerusalem. There is no way around it and no way to avoid it. The cross lies squarely at the heart of God's revelation of Christ's mission in the world. It is in the cross that the fullness of God's love is spoken to us. Indeed it is only in the cross that we come to know this God at all, hidden deep within human suffering, this *Deus Absconditus* who has become the *Deus Revelatus*.

It is under the shadow of this cross that we have gathered in this place for the purpose of renewing and strengthening our common ministry at this General Chapter. For the sake of our ordination vows, we have subscribed, or may yet subscribe in the coming days, to the Rule of the Society. For the sake of our common work, we have come to reflect upon the core of our life together in these days as we speak of the Word proclaimed and of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, these first two marks of God's holy church. But above all, for the sake of our ordination vows, for the sake of the various ministries to which we have been called, for the sake of this same Church which bears these marks as a sign of its very identity, for the sake of the world which God loves so dearly, we also come to stand before, beside and under that overarching mark of the Church, that last but central mark, that mark which by its very existence looms over all; this mark which we call the cross. For it is the cross to which Jesus leads us even as we do not want to go, even as we do not wish to see. The cross lies at the heart of our human condition, for this cross is the presence of suffering as a mark of our communal life. Called to the cross we bear the burdens of ministry daily. Called to the cross we live amidst a world which does not understand let alone accept the cross. Called to the cross we seek to live faithfully in and among the seemingly unending madness of our denominational structures which seem bent upon their various forms of self destruction. Jesus has led us to the cross and we bear the mark of the cross in our lives and in the very center of the call which has been given to us,

bearing that cross into the world for the sake of the world for we too are disciples called by Christ to see and embrace the cross in all that we do.

But even as a called disciple, Peter looks at the cross and sees only death, an end of all things, a sign of despair. But Jesus calls Peter to look again, to see with eyes of faith that which is being offered to him — a sign of hope in the midst of despair, a symbol of life in the midst of death. "Then He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed...and after three days rise again." There will be suffering. There will be rejection. There will be pain. There will sometimes be despair. We live in the midst of an imperfect world and a perfect Church filled with imperfect beings. It has not been easy and it will not be getting any easier. But the yoke of obedience has been laid upon our shoulders and in doing so we have been called to bear both the reality of the cross and the promise of the resurrection. Our common ministry might be seen as a burden to bear, including the suffering and pain which will come our way. But if we see only this we, like Peter, have failed to see with eyes of faith. And in failing to see we miss the promise of new life contained in the cross, which holds out to us its message of salvation and redemption. Jesus leads us to the cross. Jesus calls us to cross, not as something to be feared but rather as something to embrace, trusting that the power of the Word proclaimed and the grace of our baptismal gift will sustain us in the journey ahead. I see the cross. I see it clearly. How could I not, for I see that cross with the eyes of faith which gives me the sight to see my God revealed to me. I see the cross, how could I not for it is emblazoned on my +head, on my +lips and in my +heart. Amen.

Society of the Holy Trinity

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