

GOD'S COMFORTING SURPRISES – A SMORGASBORD

Pre-Lenten Seminar Session 1

Feb. 27, 2011

1. Consider the opening lines of the Matins (aka “Morning Praise”) liturgy. What do they say about prayer, about man’s nature, about grace?

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise.

Hasten to save me, O God. O Lord, come quickly to help me!

There is confession, audacity, trust - - and a speedy answer. For the opening lines are followed immediately by the:

2. *Venite*: Consider the surprising alterations between law and gospel, between First and Second Article points of emphasis.

The opening lines: ... *let us sing to the Lord, the rock of our salvation.*

Then: *The Lord is a great God*; His omnipotence is evident and overwhelms us.

Therefore: *Let us bow down and kneel*. What always was the point of bowing and kneeling and how is it the only proper response to God’s omnipotence?

But then a new, an unheard of reason to bow and kneel: *He is our God and we ... the sheep of his hand!*

3. Consider the Seventh Petition; the Fifth Petition is shocking for its position in the prayer; the Sixth Petition is the pitiful cry of one who recognizes his condition in spite of the grace heaped upon grace in the first six petitions. The Seventh Petition is just plain cheeky! What a lot of nerve to pray it! What astonishing grace the He wants, urges, encourages us to pray it!
4. Consider the Easter Sunday appearance of Jesus to the disciples, both as to when he makes it and with reference to what he says, and how the disciples answer. What does it all have to do with the doctrine of the means of grace, about grace itself? (Note especially the promise in Mark 16:7, John 20:19-20 with its expansion in Luke 24:32-45.)
5. In John 15:13-18 Jesus calls us his friends. What’s the common meaning of the word and how does Jesus use it and exalt us with its use?
6. Consider God’s consistent use of the weak and the unworthy to serve and protect those he loves. Why does he do that and what encouragement is there in it for our service?
Mary – God hides in the womb of a virgin (St. Bernard’s three great miracles);
Joseph – protector of the Holy Family, from whom we hear not one word; he never speaks; he only listens;
the Egyptians – oppressors of God’s people unwittingly protect the Son of God;
Simon of Cyrene carries the cross of the world’s Creator to manifest of the depths of God’s humiliation.

The selection the Apostles to be pillars of the church - - a motley and unfit band on a good day.

Paul, so gifted and so flawed - - a persecutor with a thorn.

Might it be a good use of time at least once in a while to ponder the specific Achilles' heel, the particular flaw or weakness that makes each of us the weak and unworthy servants of those God loves and then to rejoice the more in the fact that God loves pastors too?

7. Notice how from the beginning God keeps his most spectacular works hidden, so that we will learn to walk by faith and not by sight.

Consider the order of creation: Why not make man first?

Note the promise to Zacharias in Luke 1:16-17: Wouldn't a better question for Zacharias have been: *In the spirit of Elijah? And that's a blessing?*

Consider the report that Paul gives of his missionary efforts in Act 14:27-15:2 - - Talk about *spin!*

Session II – III The Gospel according to St. Mark

Feb. 28, 2011

In church history St. Mark is somewhat unique among the New Testament biblical authors: He is always nothing more than a “second banana.” And nevertheless look at what God has given us through this most lowly of the evangelists! A comforting thought, *nicht wahr?*

This is the simplest as well as the shortest of the gospels. It's Greek is not elegant or learned like that of Matthew and Luke. Nor does it concentrate on the profound wisdom of Jesus transmitted to us by John. Mark concentrates on the *what* of the gospel; his gospel contains more miracle accounts than any other and more little details than any other - - he paid attention to what he heard. His mission is primarily to Gentiles, and so his references to the Old Testament are sparse. Beautifully and without drawing attention to the beauty he shows Jesus to us in all his might and majesty wrapped in utter lowliness and humility. He writes under immediate inspiration; he writes as one who paid attention, who hung on every word of his spiritual father, St. Peter; he writes as one who wanted it all to come down to us just exactly as it happened.

Might we guess at why his gospel contains relatively little in the way of reflection on Jesus' teaching or even recording of some of his greatest discourses? Might it be that he saw himself too as a “second banana”? The pondering and the teaching and the implications of it all he was content to leave to his teachers, especially Peter and Paul, whose epistles were written before Mark wrote this gospel. Is it in the back of Mark's head: Yes, pay closest attention to what Peter and Paul have written; for look what at this Jesus of whom they speak has done! See in his deeds for us and for our salvation who he proved himself to be both by what he taught and by what he did!

Vss. 1-3 Notice how a grand title is followed by an introduction that already hints at a great truth expounded throughout the gospel: The greatness of the subject is masked by an abject humility of appearances.

Just “a voice”! Lowly John the Baptist with the greatest mission ever given anyone apart from the mission of the Messiah himself is just “a voice,” and a voice in the wilderness at that. Note the multiple fulfillments of prophecies here: the wilderness between Babylon and Palestine, the wilderness of Palestine itself, and of course the wilderness/desolation of the natural human heart.

Notice the grand incongruities which only make sense in the context of the doctrine of the means of grace. Again - - every pastor’s consolation!

Vs. 4 Word and sacrament are united in the work of *preaching*. Keep in mind the meaning of the work and its connection to the work of a *herald*. And look at that: 4 distinct metaphors in 5 words, all piled up in the interest of the great *terminus* of preaching.

Vss. 5-6 How inappropriate the appearance of so important a herald with so saving a message! How altogether fitting: With nothing to look at, there was only *a voice* as the object of one’s attention. And then the action of that voice carried out in a sacrament - - note the passive voice of the verb - - not a middle (*had themselves baptized*) as though the effecting actors were those coming, rather than *a voice* doing. The passive receiving is absolute, complete, perfect; the act(ive) confession is in a durative present participle.

He is dressed like Elijah with Elijah’s message of repentance. But - - and we should get used to it in the gospels - - he is superior in his work to Elijah. Just so, everything that Jesus did will have an Old Testament precedent, but will always be superior in so many ways to that precedent.

Vs. 7-8 Note the word order in vs. 7; word order is so often emphatic in Greek. Everything that follows the verb is designed to heighten the eager anticipation and the longing of both herald and hearer. The Coming One will at least have shoes (sandals) - - in the description of John’s attire there is no mention of shoes.

In what does the strength of this beggar like herald consist? How is the One Coming stronger? John’s baptism is strong; Jesus’ baptism will be stronger still, because it comes after the completion of the work promised in John’s baptism. It’s not that John’s baptism was without the Holy Spirit; it is rather that the Spirit will teach us all things after the work of Jesus is finished, all things needful and revealed in the Scriptures, promised and conveyed in the subsequent heralding of the Word and the sacrament.

Vs. 9-11 In his baptism Jesus comes to our side, to be numbered with us. The whole of the Trinity registers its approval and its connection to the purpose for which Jesus enters upon his active work of “beginning the gospel” (vs. 1).

There is a curious contrast in the violent participle describing the heavens being ripped open and then the verb in vs. 12 on the one hand and the gentle beauty of the

words and acts of the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit joins himself permanently to the Incarnate Second Person of the Trinity as he “begins the gospel,” as does the good pleasure of the Father. That fact is emphasized in the passive participle, really a verbal adjective defining an active and a durable relationship between the Father and his incarnate Son. Then note the aorist tense in the Father’s declaration; the Incarnate Son had come freely to this baptism as the beginning of the gospel; and with that solemn act the Father was well pleased and joins himself to the beginning and to all that must follow from it. The presence of the Spirit is the Trinity’s own *Amen* to all that here begins.

Vss. 12-13 Note the eagerness of the Trinity to get the work of our salvation underway in the almost violent nature of the verb: the willing Savior is emphatically urged on by the Spirit. Jesus doesn’t go to play with the devil but to do battle with him.

The battle goes on continuously for 40 days; while we don’t want to get lost in that number of days, it’s not possible to ignore the number.

The battle is unique both as to its non-stop duration and as to the launching pad for the battle. The continuous nature of the struggle gives all the more credence to Hebrews 4:15; though a good exegesis of Matthew’s account of the last three temptations accomplishes the same purpose.

Satan’s attack is directed at the human nature; the struggle is real as the writer to the Hebrews makes clear and as the service of the angels demonstrates. But it is a battle carried on by the human nature in the *unio personalis*, in the *hypostatic union*.

The battle at this *beginning of the gospel* is as all of the work of the Savior: *pro nobis*; it is a triumph of the active obedience that points ahead to the perfection of the coming passive obedience on the cross. Our redemption from beginning to end will not be bargain-basement-cheap.

Vs. 14 -15 Mark concentrates on the last half of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

So the herald of the One Coming is arrested; what credibility then can the One Coming have? The message alone, not the outward evidence, will have to accomplish the saving purpose of the gospel. But still there will be outward evidence but of the strangest sort, always and only pointing to the ultimate power in the message.

Mark gives a crisp but complete summary of Jesus’ heralding; he doubtless assumes that his readers have read the epistles of Paul, especially Romans (given the almost universal assumption/declaration of the Fathers that Mark’s gospel was written initially for a Roman audience).

NOTE: REPENTANCE WITHOUT FAITH ISN’T REPENTANCE, AND FAITH WITHOUT REPENTANCE ISN’T FAITH. AND BOTH HAVE THEIR SOURCE IN HERALDING.

Vss. 16-20 This is the second of three calls (Jn. 1, Luke 5), with each successive call suggesting a different level of understanding and commitment on the part of the ones called. But in each instance the call is in stark contrast to the apparent realities: Follow Jesus instead of the beloved John, follow Jesus whose herald is in prison, follow Jesus in the awareness of the flawed, the fallen nature of the follower compared to the might and the holiness of the one calling. And that’s always the way it is with those called to follow him.