

The end of our Lenten journey is in sight. There, over the next ridge, we can see Calvary's Holy Mountain rise into view. The end is before us; we see it draw near in today's Gospel. The stage is set in these verses. Jesus speaks again to His enemies; Jesus tells them that God's judgment will fall upon them. Jesus speaks of the vineyard owner sending his son to the wicked tenants—and what do they do, but kill the son. The vineyard owner, Jesus says, will put those wicked tenants to death. The vineyard owner is the Father; the vineyard is Israel. Its tenants, the children of Israel, would bring disaster on themselves by killing the Son, Jesus. The scribes, the chief priests know that Jesus speaks this against them, and they are angered. They want to seize Him then and there, but cannot because of the people. And so they instead send spies and lay traps. They will do underhandedly what they fear to do openly. The stage is set. The end is at hand. Soon, very soon, just days after this parable, hands will be laid on Jesus, and He will walk the way of the cross. He will be the stone, rejected by the builders, but made into the cornerstone.

Jesus' words show again that there are two ways when it comes to Jesus. There is the way taken by the scribes and chief priests, the way that rejects Jesus and casts Him aside. And there is the other way, the way that receives Jesus as Lord and places confidence, trust, and hope in Him. The first way leads to destruction; those who reject Jesus, those who reject this stone are crushed by Him. Those who receive Jesus, those who build upon Him as the cornerstone, who make Him their foundation, are delivered unto eternal life. Jesus, Christ crucified, marks the parting of the ways: He divides those who reject Him to their own condemnation from those delivered unto Him for their salvation.

And so St. Paul urges us to walk the way of Christ; to build upon this chief cornerstone, lest we find ourselves crushed underneath Him. He reminds us that what counts above all else is Christ. We hear in Philippians that for the sake of Christ, Paul suffered the loss of all things. To be found in Him, possessing nothing of his own righteousness, but receiving all of Christ's, that is the purpose and the goal. To gain Christ; to have the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord—for this, Paul gives up all things; he considers them rubbish—and bids us to do the same.

And let's be clear: there is no shortchanging going on here. Paul is no poorer for giving up all things for the sake of Christ. All else is counted rubbish only in comparison to knowing Christ. What can compare to this? What can outshine the love of Christ, showered upon us; what can offer more than God's compassion, reaching out to give us life? What is greater than the faith, the love that springs to life in our hearts when we know Christ? All else pales in comparison to this glory. All those vain things that charm us most—these are loss, when compared to the surpassing greatness of Christ. For these vain things, should they distract us from Christ, lure us only to destruction, crushed underneath this rejected stone. But Christ offers us the sure foundation of hope and faith that leads to the fullness of His life—a life far richer than any other.

And so Paul presses on toward the goal: being made like Christ. Paul pushes forward to become like Jesus in His death, to attain the resurrection from the dead. He pushes on to bear the cross in this world; to suffer as a Christian, to give up those things that lead away from Christ, to give freely of himself in love for Christ and neighbor. Paul strives to deny himself for the good of others—this is the life of Christ! A life that freely gives; that holds back nothing, but strives to shower blessings on others. And this is the life that leads to the glory of the next world; the

life that ends in its heavenly goal of perfect fellowship with God; being united perfectly with Him.

This we have not yet obtained—neither had Paul. He had not yet been made perfect, neither in suffering nor in glory. Neither have we. This life is a work in progress, so long as we are in this world. Continually here we must press on to become like Jesus by cross and suffering; push forward to attain to His resurrection from the grave.

We press on toward this goal, for Christ Jesus has made us His own. This counts above all—Jesus knows us. Jesus claims us. Jesus adopts us. Jesus makes us His own dear children. What counts above all is what Jesus has done for us. This inspires our striving, our faith, our hope, our love; this moves us to live as Christ, to strive to be made like Him. To know God is first to be known by Him. To know God is first to receive His love and grace and forgiveness. To know God is to be called in baptism, to be born again as His child. And how similar to children we are. Infants know their parents because they are first known by them. They come to know their parents because their parents are always about them, caring and providing for them. They know their parents because their parents first know them, love them, care for them, speak to them. So it is with God. He first loves us; we come to know Him as we receive His grace, His love, His care; as He speaks to us. To know God is to listen to this voice, to be instructed by Him. Only when God's love is in place; only when God first has made us His own, can we press on towards the goal of knowing Christ perfectly; living His life; attaining to His glory in the resurrection.

What comfort to all of us gathered here today: Christ HAS made YOU His own. He knows you. He loves you. He forgives you. He speaks to you, to shape and form you in His image. He leads you down the paths that lead ultimately to His glory. This is comforting to

those here, who have known Christ's love for decades. It is comforting to those who have sat at His feet, hearing His word for years within these very walls time and time again. It is comforting for those new members we have here—Christ knows you too! He has led you here that He might continue to shower His grace and love upon you within the walls of Zion. It is comforting for young and old alike—Christ knows each of us and loves us and cares for us, regardless of age. His love is with the youngest infant, baptized in His name; His love is with our senior members, who have walked with Him for year. Christ has made you His own.

You are not alone then, as you press on toward the goal. You are surrounded here by your brothers and sisters in Christ; united with them by faith in God's Son, by love for Him and one another. Press on toward that goal! Do not be distracted by any sort of rubbish that would lead you away from Christ. Put aside such sins; recognize the danger within them, the danger that they might crowd Christ out of the picture. Press on toward the goal! Live like Christ, giving freely in love to one another, seeking the continual grace and blessing of your heavenly Father. Live under Christ, turning eagerly to His Word here at church, in devotions and prayer at home. Follow where Christ leads, pushing forward to the goal of attaining the resurrection from the dead.

Press on now, with the church, towards the end of our Lenten journey. Press on to those mighty deeds of Christ that have won our salvation. Journey with the church to Jerusalem, as we enter it next week, as Palm Sunday draws us into our observance of Holy Week. Ride then with your Savior into Jerusalem; see Him ride on to die. Walk with Him to the upper room, spending Maundy Thursday with Him as He gives us His supper. Journey forward to Gethsemane, to the crowd of soldiers arresting Him; to the chief priest, to see Him condemned, to Pilate, to hear the death sentence sealed. Then walk that way of tears with Him, as He bears the cross to Calvary.

Watch with Him as darkness falls, as He gives up His spirit to death. Rest with Him in the tomb, until new life bursts forth on Easter. Press on to see Him open the way for you to His glory. Push forward, that you might know Him all the better as you hear again of His love for you, displayed in the glorious deeds of Holy Week. Press on, that you might become like Jesus in His death and attain to the glory of His resurrection.

God bless us as we draw near to these holy days. God guard and keep us as we follow Christ to the cross, that in the end we might attain the full glory of the resurrection from the dead. God bless and keep us, whom Christ has made His own. God lead us to press forward to the goal; as He leads us in the good life that He gives to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.