Pentecost 19 / September 29, 2024

Mark 9:50

“*For everyone will be salted with fire…Have salt in yourselves and be at peace with one another.*”

Everyone will be seasoned with fire

The ninth and tenth chapters of Mark are a bridge between Jesus’ transfiguration, the entry into Jerusalem and the consummation of His ministry in the cross and resurrection. Three disciples experience Jesus’ glory in divine light. They are amazed, but do not understand. When they return to the group, they find the others engaged in controversy with the scribes, unable to understand why they cannot cast out an unclean spirit. Jesus attributes the problem to their faith, in particular to their lack thereof. He speaks of His coming death and resurrection, which none of them understands. Again, underscoring their lack of faith. Despite their manifest misunderstanding of Jesus and misapprehension of their own roles as disciples, they argue as to which of them is the greatest and forbid others from carrying out a ministry of exorcism in Jesus’ Name; figuring that is their exclusive domain, despite their recent failure.

These chapters call us to ask: Who is Jesus? What does it mean to follow Him in faith? Jesus shows Himself to be the Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity. Moses and Elijah’s presence at His transfiguration show that He is the Messiah promised to Israel and all people in the Scriptures. The words of Moses and the Prophets show that He is the promised Saviour who brings salvation to all believers by the wounds of His body and the blood of His cross. To follow Him is to believe Him as our Saviour and trust Him as our Lord and God, even when we don’t understand His ways, in fact especially when we don’t understand. We follow Jesus not for personal glory or reward in time. We follow so we may receive the reward of His service in forgiveness and experience His glory in eternal life. He leads us into His Father’s presence under the shadow of the cross.

Jesus says, “*Everyone will be salted with fire.*” What does it mean to be salted with fire? Salt is an ancient seasoning, used by people of every culture. Salt was so valuable in the ancient near east, that Roman soldiers were once paid in salt. The saying, “Not worth his salt,” was applied to soldiers in particular and workers in general, who were not worth their wages. Salt was used in certain sacrifices offered by the Levitical priests in the temple. I presume the salt caused an explosion of flame and increased the heat of the fire. Salt heated the flame to purge away the dross. Salt was used to preserve meat from decay. Salt purges and preserves. Salt may have been seen as having some healing value in preventing infection by being applied to wounds. Hence the expression to “rub salt into wounds.” When I was a kid, adults use to say the antibiotic hurt because it was working. The more it hurt, the better it worked!

Regardless of the real or supposed properties of salt, Jesus is alerting us to the sufferings that will come to those who follow Him. These sufferings will have the effect of purifying and preserving the faith of those who accept it as part of the cost of following Him. The disciples who once argued as to which of them was the greatest and prevented outsiders from sharing their ministry, would be salted with fire more than anyone. The apostle Paul, who was himself an outsider, wrote in 1 Corinthians, “*I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death…We have become, and still are, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.*” Those who were the greatest in human terms were salted with more fire than anyone else. Yet it was to their eternal benefit and blessing. Their faith was refined, purified and brought to a glorious fulfillment in their witness to Jesus in their faithfulness unto death. Salt is everything by which God purifies and preserves our faith in Christ that He might bring it to fulfillment in eternal life.

To be salted with fire is to resist the desires of the sinful nature within us, the world that allures us and the devil who tempts us. Jesus said that if our eyes, hands or feet should cause us to sin, we should go so far as to cut them off, so that we may enter life. Strong words. But the call of discipleship is to resist sin and embrace life in Christ no matter what the cost. What good is it to embrace the world and its desires in time, only to lose our souls in eternity? No hardship in time will be worth comparing to the glory of eternity in God’s presence. In 2 Corinthians Paul wrote, “*This slight momentary affliction (this salting with fire) is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*” Whatever burdens and hardships we endure in time, will be more than compensated by the glory to be revealed to us in eternity.

Being salted with fire is resisting temptation by the power of God’s love in Christ, in view of the glory to be revealed in eternity. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape that you may endure it.*” God has provided Jesus our Great High Priest, who was tempted as we are without sin. We turn to Him in time of temptation for strength. When we fall and fail, we come to Him for mercy in the grace of forgiveness. In Him we receive grace to help in time of need and mercy when we fall and fail the test.

The ministry of the apostles was and is the ministry of the word. God’s word is the power of creation. God’s word is the life force of all things living. Jesus is the Living Word of God. He clothed Himself in human flesh for our salvation. The ministry of the word proclaims Jesus as saviour. The disciples were called into the ministry of the word personally by Jesus. They were trained, taught and given the responsibility of ministering the word to others. However, they did not possess the word exclusively from all others. John tells Jesus they prevented Jewish exorcists from casting out evil spirits in His name, because they were not part of their group. Jesus said not to prevent them, “*for no one who does a mighty work in my name will soon be able to speak evil of me.*” God gave apostles, pastors, teachers to be servants of the word, but the word is master of all.

The word of Jesus is power unto itself. It may be entrusted to certain people, but it is never the property of any person. Evangelists, pastors and teachers are servants of the word, not its lords and masters. Persons entrusted with the word lose their privilege when they depart from the word and preach a different message. Paul wrote to the Galatians saying, “*But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we previously preached to you, let him be accursed.*” When Paul perceived that Peter was not acting in accordance with the truth of the gospel, he publicly rebuked him. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, regardless of the person who shares it, or the manner in which it is conveyed. Moses exclaimed, “*Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets.*” Prophets speak the word of God in truth. In particular the truth that God gave Jesus to bear the sins of the world and be Saviour of all who believe. What is important is that the word is received through faith inspired by the Holy Spirit and believed. The gospel of Jesus is the power of God to eternal life to all who believe.

Speak the word of God in truth, believe in your heart that Jesus is Lord and follow Him as your Saviour and you will be salted and seasoned with fire. You will be at war with your sinful passions. You will be stalked and lured into temptation by the devil. You will experience the hostility of the world that wants everyone to walk in its ways, rather than in the righteous way of the Lord. Everyone will be salted with fire, but God uses salt and fire for His own good purposes to accomplish His eternal good in the lives of believers.

The fire and salt of trial and temptation drive us closer to the heart of His love in Christ Jesus. They help us see the importance of the body of Christ, so that as believers we support each other in our faith and seek to live in peace. Trial and fire lead us to the word of Christ: spoken, heard, read, received in the water of Holy Baptism and in the bread and wine of communion. There God gives us the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, the love of Jesus, faith to believe and the salt to live at peace with one another as we await heaven’s joy and peace. God in His grace, preserve our faith in Christ Jesus and bring it to fulfillment in our share of His resurrection to everlasting life. In His Name. Amen