

“The Absolution Kingdom”

St. John 20:19-31

April 19, 2020

SERMON 1909

by Michael David Henson

The sermon text is from John 20:21-23, “So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ ²²And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Apostle St. John’s Gospel, the other John, the Baptist, was sent from God “to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe” (1:7). What is it that God wanted us to believe? John the Baptist declared, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” This true Light, the Word of God incarnate, the only begotten Son of the Father was sent for the purpose of taking away the sin of the world.

Here is the way in which Jesus Christ did accomplished that purpose:

--First of all, John the Baptist announces, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2). And then Jesus, too proclaims saying, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent” (Luke 4:43).

--Second, Jesus accomplishes the foundation for that kingdom by His suffering, death and resurrection. Jesus secures the atonement of the sins of the whole world. ¹ John 2:2 says, “And He Himself is the propitiation {*the atoning sacrifice*} for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

--Third, after His resurrection, Jesus institutes His church and sends out His Apostles to preach the good news of the forgiveness of sins. John 20:31 says, “...but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” **The kingdom of God comes and grows through the announcement of the forgiveness of sins or absolution.** Through that message, Jesus provides **the gift of the Holy Spirit who works faith** in the hearts of the hearers to believe. Today’s Holy Gospel clearly records our risen Lord Jesus’ desire for the mission of His church. St. John 20:22-23 says,

“And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

Where and when, God is having His sent ones—first Prophets, then John the Baptist, the Apostles, and now pastors—forgive sins, people are incorporated into the kingdom of God. Galatians 4:4-5 speaks of sinners becoming **God’s adopted sons through faith**. “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”

Although the other Gospels make frequent references to the kingdom of God, St. John's Gospel only refers to **the word "kingdom"** in two places. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Nicodemus comes to Him at night. Jesus tells him,

"Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3b-5).

Jesus concludes his talk with Nicodemus saying, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The kingdom of God comes through being born again through faith in Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God comes through the faith-creating Spirit-working water of Holy Baptism.

This lengthy introduction to my sermon is to show you **the connection between the resurrection of Jesus Christ and Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit and His command to His church to forgive sins.** Last week we saw that Christ's resurrection is the proof that in His suffering and death, He paid the penalty for all sins of all sinners. This week the risen Lord desires to apply those benefits of forgiveness to us by faith, so that we might be justified.

In today's Holy Gospel, Jesus is giving the church her mission to forgive sins. The church is none other than the kingdom of God. Luther fully understood this point. In the Small Catechism it says, "God's kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead godly lives here it time and there in eternity." St. Luke says that through the New Testament church, "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations" (Lk 24:47).

Why is that connection so important? **We don't want to celebrate the Lord's resurrection, but then go on to leave behind our Lord's command to preach forgiveness of sins. We dare not ignore our Lord's mandate to His church.**

It's time to examine the other reference in St. John's Gospel to the word kingdom. In John chapter 18, Jesus is speaking to Pontius Pilate who is determining what to do with the death penalty case against Him. In response to Pilate's question about whether Jesus is the King of the Jews, He later says,

"My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.... You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (John 18:36-37).

The truth of Jesus' voice is made clear in today's Holy Gospel. Jesus is sending out His ministers as His representatives. He gives them the Holy Spirit and they are to forgive sins. Everyone who is of the truth listens to the church's announcement of absolution.

"I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just and valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."

The kingdom of God, the church, has one over-arching message—the forgiveness of sins. That message is none other than the voice of Jesus. There have been some who have not highly regarded the absolution spoken by the Lord's ministers. They have questioned whether it is valid or true. We must respond with a clear response. Of course, it is the Lord's will! The risen Lord sent His church to forgive sins. He promised the Holy Spirit would be present in those words of absolution. Our Lord in St. Luke 10:16 said, "He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me."

To reject that message is to disbelieve the word of our risen Jesus and to call God a liar. We know that Jesus wants this message of forgiveness to be proclaimed. Just as soon as Jesus had risen from the dead, He comes to His apostles and does two things. First, He proclaims to them forgiveness of sins, that their consciences might be set at peace. Second, He sends them out with the commission to forgive sins with the Holy Spirit's power that those who hear their message might believe His word.

Last of all, we need to understand that **Pilate truly did understand Jesus' words, "My kingdom is not of this world."** Jesus' kingdom did not overthrow the government or to take over control. Jesus' kingdom was not about the power of force in which His disciples would fight to prevent His arrest. The disciples in Jesus' kingdom did not withhold taxes, but paid them. John the Baptist told the baptized soldiers to do their job, saying, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:14).

The world's kingdom is concerned with outward rule and the protection of body and possessions. The government uses the threat of laws and the exercise of soldiers and weapons. **Jesus' kingdom, which is concerned with forgiveness and salvation, did not conflict with this world's government or disturb it at all.** Though Pilate disagreed with the charge of insurrection, he, nevertheless, handed Jesus over to be crucified. Why? **Similar to today, the kingdom of God is completely non-essential to the government.** Pilate considered Christ's kingdom to be of quite little value.

We must come to understand that the world, which does not value our Lord's mandate, thinks very little of Christ's message of the forgiveness of sins. They don't understand the importance of why we gather to hear the Word and receive the Sacraments. If the world sees something which we have, they will sacrifice the kingdom of God for what we have. For the sake of public health, they will cancel our meetings. If our message of repentance for sin and forgiveness conflicts with public policy, they will prosecute us for hate speech. If we have wealth or property and they want it, they will come and take it.

However, we must come to understand that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world! Our conscience is satisfied that God's wrath is set aside and we are His dearly loved children. Though the devil points out our sins, Jesus has sent out His word of forgiveness so that we have peace.

They cannot hurt or harm us. They cannot overcome Christ's church. We have received the forgiveness of our sins and we need not fear death. Though they take away our gatherings, we are still a communion of saints and the body of Christ that cannot be separated. Though they take away our physical body, we have eternal life. Though they threaten us with fines and confiscation, they cannot take away our faith in

Christ's forgiveness. **The things of this world are non-essential to our life in Christ.** There is nothing which this world's government can do to harm Christ's church.

On this first Sunday after Easter, we "who have celebrated the solemnities of the Lord's resurrection" are not any less a part of Christ's kingdom than before. We are not any less children of God. We continue to hear Jesus' voice of truth. His church proclaims the word of absolution for all who believe in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit convinces me that it is true, as if God our dear Lord told us Himself.

We who believe in Christ's resurrection continue to pray that we may, by the help of God's grace, bring forth the fruits of *Christ's resurrection* in our life and conversation."

Today's Epistle explains, "For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1 John 5:4-5) As the Epistle from 1 John 5 goes on to say, we have "the witness of God" concerning His Son, which is "greater" than the witness of man. The reason that the church, the kingdom of God cannot be overcome is because we have "the witness" in ourselves—that is, faith! 1 John 5:10 says, "He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son."

My dear Christian friends, through faith in the Word of Christ's forgiveness, you have God's very voice to sustain you as His dear child. Jesus Christ has atoned for your sins. He has sent out His ministers to proclaim to you promised gift of salvation through faith in Christ's work of atonement. When you are shown your sins or doubt, remember that our risen Christ's desire is that you hear His Word of absolution, "I forgive you your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."