

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Today the paraments are green. The Liturgical Year, the Church's Year of Grace, generally divides into two halves. The first half is the Festival Season. The Festival Season celebrates the events in the Holy Incarnation, birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ. The second "half" of the Church Year is the Trinity season, also called "Ordinary Time" and the "Time of the Church", the season in which we find ourselves now.

The Festival season too finds its center in Christ and His teaching. The Paraments are green because by His teaching, by the work of the Holy Spirit, this is for the Church a time of growth. This does not mean numerical growth. The Holy Spirit works increase where and when He wills. The growth that the Word and Spirit bring forth is manifest in the individual Christian: in an increase of faith, an increase in the knowledge of God and His Holy Word, an increase in love for God, and an increase in our love for neighbor.

The source of life and growth in the Church is Christ, the Bread of Life, who alone gives to drink of Living Water. Hear the Word of the Lord: "I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing." It is as branches of the Life-Giving Vine that we are nourished and grow. We are nourished by the Gospel in all its forms.

We are justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Having been converted, having been justified, we live out our lives growing. That growth is a mark of sanctification. Sanctification is the continual process of becoming what we have already been declared to be in justification – which is to say that we become more and more pleasing to God in our daily lives.

The branch that fails to bear fruit is cut off and thrown into the fire, not because bearing fruit merits salvation, but because while we are saved by faith alone, saving faith is never alone. God-pleasing works always follow, because the True Vine nourishes and sustains the branches.

Consider the Words of the Apostle: "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the Glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." That newness of life is sanctification. And if you would be a Christian, you should do as the Apostle admonishes – you should walk in newness of life.

In baptism your old man, the sinful, fallen son of Adam, was crucified with Christ. That is to say that you died, that the body of sin might be done away with. The Law has no mastery over a dead man. In Christ you have new life, and in that life you are free. Therefore, the Apostle reminds you, you should no longer be slaves to sin, for he who has died has been freed from sin. These are Words for you. They are Words that describe the Christian life.

That life, life as the branches of the One, Life-Giving Vine, is what our Lord describes when He preaches the great Sermon on the Mount. He describes what the Christian looks like. But more, He teaches that external appearance cannot be a mere pharisaical show. It is the natural fruit of true righteousness, internal righteousness, a clean heart. A true child of God does not look, act, or speak like the fallen world does, because the Christian has a different Spirit, the Holy Spirit.

You, dear Christian, are a citizen of a Heavenly Kingdom, a citizen not of the world - but in the world - a subject of the Eternal King whose Kingdom has no end. And so the Christian lives like it. And that the Christian does not to curry favor with God, but rather because in response to God's love faith can do no other.

The Lord preaches the Sermon on the Mount that men know what sanctification looks like, what true holiness looks like. By His Words He gives you a mirror by which to examine yourself, a perfect mirror that brings to light your shortcomings, your imperfections, your failures, in a word – your sin. The righteousness God demands exceeds that of the most devout Jewish religious leaders. Truth be told, it exceeds the abilities of all fallen men.

That raises the bar to a height unattainable by fallen men. Consider the equations and outcomes of the Sermon on the Mount. Anger equals murder. Disparaging your brother merits the fires of hell. Failing to be reconciled to your brother causes separation from God. Refusing to extend forgiveness to others equals rejecting the forgiveness of God. God does not desire the offerings of an unrepentant sinner. Sin prevents the sinner from approaching the altar, the very altar where God has promised to be.

Were the Word of God to end there, no man would be saved. The mirror of the Law always condemns. And if you consider your sin, you must confess that condemnation is just. But the Word of God does not stop there. There is a Gospel Word, a Word of forgiveness and life, a Word of reconciliation, a Word that works and sustains faith, a Word that empowers you to live a God-pleasing life by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Consider the Sermon on the Mount as a description of Christ. Against Him they broke the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment. He did not murder. Indeed He neither hated nor harmed any man. And more than doing no harm, He healed. He raised the dead. He perfectly kept the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment. Then He freely submitted to their murderous ways, and willingly gave His life.

Although He was reviled, He disparaged no man. He blessed. He spoke the Truth in love. He kept the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment perfectly. And while His brothers had something against Him, His Divinity, it is Christ who left His Gift at the altar – He gave Himself on the altar of the cross, to reconcile you to Himself, that you enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

His perfect righteousness is imputed to you in Holy Baptism. True righteousness is found in being united to Christ, who alone is Righteous. And the Apostle makes a promise to all those baptized into Christ: "...if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him... for the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise, you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Redeemed by Christ, converted, justified, in faith you can proclaim with the Psalmist "O how I love Your Law, it is my meditation all the day." For you have died to sin, and you desire to please God, because that's what faith does. And when you fall short, the Blood of Christ covers you. Your faith knows that growing in love and knowledge is only possible through the Means

of Grace: God's Word preached and taught in its purity, and the Sacraments administered according to Christ's Institution.

So this day you hear God's Saving Word. You study and meditate on His Word. You receive His absolution, His forgiveness of all your sins. And you receive His Body and His Blood, because you believe His Promise, and because faith hungers for Christ. You eat and drink, and you are nourished.

And so you grow. You grow in faith, in the knowledge of God, in love for God, and in love for neighbor. You are reconciled to God and to neighbor because of the Gift Christ gives you at this altar. And yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.

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