

## **“Whether pastors, too, can be saved.” Mt 21:33-46**

**“Hear another parable. There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit. And the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants, more than the first. And they did the same to them. Finally, he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.’ And they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. When therefore the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons.” Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: “‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes’? Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.” When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them. And although they were seeking to arrest him, they feared the crowds, because they held him to be a prophet.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today’s meditations are going to be a bit different. I am not sure whether you want to stay for this sermon... it is mostly about pastors. As is our today’s Gospel reading. You are still welcome to listen for there will be things that apply to all of us.

This is remarkable, and we need to notice it. Who are those people, so often rebuked by God Yahweh in the Old Testament times, and so often criticized by Jesus? Can you guess? Yes, religious teachers and religious leaders, or we could say – pastors. Sure, everyone gets their share from time to time, but this group really stands out.

But then, think about another phenomenon – warnings. Jesus warns us. Paul warns us. Peter warns us. John warns us. From whom? “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (Mt 7:15).

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” (Acts 20:29-30).

“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies...” (2 Pet 2:1) “Children... as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come... They went out from us, but they were not of us.” (1 Jn 2:18–19) It’s all about ... pastors.

We may wish that here in the Church we are safe. But it is about what is going to happen in the Church that Jesus and the apostles warn us. I know it is not the most comforting thought, but the Holy Spirit is vocal, so that we know what to expect.

We all should be clear that pastors are not immune to mistakes and false teachings. We need to remember that the devil works overtime to corrupt and confuse pastors. And it makes so much sense. If he succeeds with one pastor, he potentially can lead astray the entire congregation. Smart tactics! But how does it happen?

I remember my first encounters with Jesus. Beginning to read the Bible. Something so pure, beautiful and full of colours, and live and love and goodness. It was like opening doors to a different reality, so much better reality. I wanted a piece of it, it seemed so attractive. I wanted to be present where this beauty was found, among Christians, in the Divine Service, and wanted to drink it with big gulps.

Many adult converts share similar experiences. Everything about the Church seemed so special. Not the outer forms, but the precious treasures which were hidden, and also revealed in the Church.

I looked at pastors, indeed, as the stewards of God's mysteries. My baptism was something special. I still remember the most incredible feeling of freedom and lightness and joy... after we run, we run like we had wings, it was amazing.

I remember when I was for the first time invited to read the Scriptures during the Service. I remember the humbling feeling I had waiting for my turn. At that moment I clearly realized that I could not open my mouth to read, unless the Lord Jesus enabled me. I felt how totally dependent on Him I was.

Jesus' brother James wrote: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." How scared I was, when I received the call to study theology! I knew I wasn't worthy. I knew I wasn't fit. I knew who I was, and I thought that the earth may open and swallow me.

When Martin Luther consecrated the Lord Supper for the first time, he spilled the wine from the cup. His hands were shaking as he was terrified from the thought that he was holding in his hand the very blood of His holy Lord Jesus Christ.

Such experiences are not rare. When we face God's holiness, when He draws us closer to Him, there is this godly fear, when sinners realize that they are encountering something out of this world, something dangerous and wild, but at the same time – so all-surpassingly good, and kind and attractive.

But ... time goes and for one, we begin to forget how extra-ordinary our calling is, and also, we begin to forget how ordinary we, pastors, ourselves are. The master of deception works his magic and a few years along the way we may have problems.

We are called to serve with the Word and Sacraments. The holy things of God! Such a wonderful and undeserved privilege. We as pastors are called to immerse ourselves

in the Word of God, to take deep breath and dive in searching for the amazing riches of God's grace and wisdom, discovering the grand story of this world, marvelling at the beauty of our Lord and rejoicing in the eternal hope that we have in Jesus.

Then, sharing this Great News, these words of eternal life with others whom God the Father sends our way. Serving them with the Means of the Holy Spirit; literary feeding them with God's forgiveness, salvation and holiness. What a joy!

But, to human eye those appear to be very ordinary things. Nothing special. The Bible. An ancient book. You may even get a smart and sophisticated professor who teaches you that the Bible is just a product of human efforts, our thoughts about God.

Ancient thoughts at that. Sure, no pastor can openly admit that they don't care about the Bible, for then they would exclude themselves from the Christian church, but tragically many have little trust and little respect for this Book.

In our own church we can find wide a spectrum of what pastors practically believe about the Bible. For some the Scripture is breathed out by God, truthful and trustworthy, and able to make us wise for salvation in Jesus. Amen!

Others believe that the Bible just contains the Word of God among other words written by men. Or even that the Bible is simply the product of its time and we need to live according to our time and culture. And that is where the master of lies wins.

With such diverse ideas about what the Bible is and does, and how we are to approach it, it is impossible to reach true unity of faith. So, everyone then comes up with what is "good in their own eyes".

Tragically, we can see it happening in our church – because we don't agree on what the Bible is, we also don't agree on what the Gospel is, we don't agree on what God's will for our new lives is, and we don't agree on how God brings new people into His Church. Remember Jesus' words: "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and a divided household falls" (Luke 11:17). That's where we are.

In the midst of such confusion, the privilege to serve with God's holy things and to be guided by His holy Word may become a burden, or maybe worse – boredom. Then we may start looking for something new, for something different, for something that would spice things up, that would be more fun, more entertaining.

Step by step our focus from serving with the Word and Sacraments according to the instructions of our Lord, switches to pleasing and entertaining people. Thus, well-meaning servants of our Lord Jesus are gradually weakened and may turn into false teachers who lead people away from Jesus. Exactly as the apostles warned us.

The second risk was about pastors overestimating our importance. Yes, we are the ones who teach. We are those who come with authority. We are those to whom our brothers and sisters of Christ often look up in trust. It is so easy to begin to think that it is us, who are so extraordinary.

But the truth is that we are simply filling in for Jesus. We are called and taught and train so that we could speak the words of Jesus, not our smartish ideas. He has called us so that He can use our mouth to proclaim and teach His will and His Gospel.

He has called us so that He could use our hands to share His gifts for us. Therefore, anyone should listen to us only as far as we faithfully speak the pure message of Jesus as we have received it in the Scripture. We have no authority of our own.

Even if all the pastors of the world combined all our education, and skills and efforts and passion, on our own we can't save a single sinner. Only the life-giving and Spirit filled words of our Lord Jesus can do that.

This is why we so often pray for our pastors, so that by God's grace they are kept in His truth and could continue faithfully proclaim and teach the beautiful Gospel as the Holy Spirit Himself has revealed it to us.

Okay, where does it leave you? No, you are not off the hook! You are not innocent in this mess. Examine yourselves! How seriously are you taking your responsibilities of learning the Word and ordering your lives according to the Gospel?

It is easy to become bored with God's holy things. They seem so ordinary. Every week the same... confession and Absolution... yes, yes, we know... But no! This is where Jesus Himself gives you your ticket to His Heavenly Kingdom.

Sermon... yes, yes... every week. But no! If faithfully preached, those are the words of Jesus Himself, words that are spirit and life. They create and sustain your saving faith. The Holy Communion... yes, yes... some even say we have too much of it.

But no! It is Jesus Christ, the holy Son of eternal God, putting into your mouth eternal life, uniting you to Himself, filling you with His Holy Spirit, making home with you, sharing with you His holiness! It is such a miracle and mystery!

But seems so ordinary to our eyes. I will tell you a story. Someone was visiting a congregation, and was really impressed with their pastor's preaching and teaching. "Such interesting sermon, so rich Biblical teaching! Lucky you!"

In response the local people just shuck their shoulders: "What a big deal, more or less like the others, we hear them every week." What a big deal... really?! Often someone who has been deprived of the Gospel can hungrily and joyfully eat it up, while those, who are blessed to hear it often, value it for nothing. Instead, "give us something new and fun, for we are bored to have the same food again and again!"

Are we much different? How much do we appreciate what the Lord provides for us? But see, with our spiritual food it is similarly as with our regular food. Having it abundantly and regularly we may feel overfed and unappreciative.

But what happens if our food it is taken away from us for a couple of days? What Jesus says is terrifying: “Therefore, I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits.”

This actually is happening. The Gospel is being taken from the former Christian countries and given to others. Around 100 years ago, 80% of Christians lived in Northern hemisphere, in so called Christendom. Today it is only around 20%.

Dr Luther wrote an essay: “Whether solders, too, can be saved?” In context of our today’s sermon, we should ask: “Whether pastors, too, can be saved?” The Holy Spirit gives us several answers on what will happen on the Last Day.

There will be those to whom Jesus will say: ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Mt 7:23). Then there will be those, who had built with “wood, hay and straw” and their work will burn up, “though they themselves will be saved, but only as through fire.” (1 Co 3:12–15).

And then there will be those to whom Jesus will say: “Well done, good and faithful servants. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.” (Mt 25:23). Wow! :)

You know, Jesus really wants every pastor to be in the last category. Even those who openly oppose Him. Just looked at today’s reading, how Jesus was dealing with His opponents. They came to accuse Him, wanted to capture Him and to murder Him; what could be worse?! And what did Jesus do?

He keeps engaging with them, He keeps teaching them, He keep calling them to repentance, and as we know from Acts, eventually many responded to His kind and patient invitation. The same is true also today. Jesus hasn’t change.

He gave up His life for pastors too, for all pastors. For faithful pastors, and for those who mean well, but have fallen prey to the master of deception, and even for those who have hardened their hearts and refuse to listen to what the Holy Spirit teaches them. Jesus wants everyone to be saved.

Dear brothers and sisters, please, pray for all pastors! For they are God’s gift to His Church, they are called and sent for our sake, to feed God’s people and care for them, and we will all benefit immensely from rich and good spiritual food.

Pray that pastor don’t lose the awe and wonder at God’s holy mysteries, that we too would hear the Gospel, that we would find much joy in our ministry, that we would appreciate the great and undeserved privilege entrusted to us, that we would be blessed with clear understanding of the Gospel and would remain faithful to this high calling. For then our dear Father may choose to extend the season of His grace.

Amen.