

## **“Will you stay with Jesus?” Matthew 26:31-36**

**Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter answered him, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny me three times.” Peter said to him, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” And all the disciples said the same.**

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

This evening for our meditation we have the words of the Gospel according to Matthew, where Jesus foretells the shameful falling away of His most faithful and dedicated disciples. As the society in which we live is rapidly getting more and more hostile to the Triune God, to Jesus and to His Church, it is good for us to reflect on this event and what it may teach us.

The apostles. The chosen groups of Jesus’ closest disciples. He Himself had handpicked them to follow Him. They had been with Jesus since the beginning of His public ministry, since His baptism in Jordan river.

They had heard Jesus teaching, they had witnessed His amazing miracles, – healings and feeding of the thousands, casting out of demons and raising of the dead, silencing the storm, and more. They had bathed in this loving kindness.

They had confessed that they believed Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the promised Saviour. They were certain of their commitment to Jesus. And why not? They had felt good with Him. Very good. Protected and provided.

They had lacked nothing and Jesus had taken care of everything. Now He was welcomed in Jerusalem with “Hosanna to the Son of David”. The disciples were looking forward for more good things to come, as Jesus receives His Kingdom.

They were genuine in their hearts when Peter said: “Though they all fall away because of you; I will never fall away... Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” And all the disciples said the same.” On a sunny day...

And yet... We know what happened. They all run away... What about us? We haven’t seen Jesus as the apostles did. We cannot see Him that way today. We have only heard about Him from His messengers the apostles and evangelists.

We may have even experienced His healing, His divine presence, His peace that surpasses all understanding, or even some of His miracles in our lives. But it still is not as tangible and persuasive an experience as that of His closest disciples.

Today it is not Jesus, it is Christianity in the West, or we could say – the Church that is being captured and tried by the adversaries of the Triune God. One after another inspired teachings of the Holy Scripture are under attack by the world.

The credibility of the Bible. Historicity of Biblical events. Especially the resurrection of Jesus. Teaching on creation. On marriage, family and sexuality. And today even – on who we are as human beings. Remember, Jesus quoted:

“I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.” The Church is being stricken right now... and what is going to happen with the sheep of the flock? The question we need to ask ourselves is this – will we stay?

Will I stay? We all have made our public promises to Jesus. How faithful are we to our promises? And I am not talking about those many of our family members and friends, who stood before the Church and in the presence of God and publicly made their solemn vows.

To gladly listen to the Gospel, to regularly receive the Sacrament, to teach their children Christian faith and to bring them up in the Church. Beautiful ceremonies... pictures taken... food and wine consumed... And that was the last time when they were seen among God’s people.

No, I am not talking about them. I am talking about us – about the regulars. How faithful are we? How much courage do we have? Look at Peter! “I will never fall away... even if I must die, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same...

A few hours later, they all run, just to save themselves. You see, their weakness is described for our sake. What can we learn from this event? That we are in any way better? Or that we are more courageous? Or that we would never do that?

No, not at all! But to teach us that we all are as weak and unreliable as they were. When times are good and there is no cost to following Jesus, we are confident. But as the situation change, we may be as cowardly as the apostles were on that evening. That is true. It may not sound too flattering, but it is true. On our own we can do... what? Yes – nothing! This is what the apostles learned that evening.

Jesus knew about it – so He told it to them. Jesus knows it about us as well, even if we are not pleased with that thought. Jesus reveals this to us not to humiliate or shame us, but for our own benefit. “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace.” (John 16:33) So that we are assured that He knows who we are and what we are capable of, and that yet, He embraces and welcomes us.

Besides ... that was not the end of the story. A few days later, Jesus appeared to His disciples. To His fearful and confused disciples after they had so shamefully failed Him. He appeared to them as their Risen, Glorious and Gracious Lord.

Finally, finally they understood who He was. How beautifully Thomas puts it: “My Lord and my God!” To whom all authority is given, in heavens and on earth. The Holy One, who has life, true life in Him, the Ultimate Judge of the earth.

Finally they trusted their Risen Lord. They had learned that everything that Jesus had taught them was true. That even death is not the end. When we walk with Jesus, it is simple the beginning of our new life with our glorious and kind Lord.

And just like that a handful of frightened Jewish men were changed into a cohort of bold and courageous witnesses of the Risen Lord Jesus. Nothing could scare them anymore. No threats could keep from proclaiming God's truth. We are here today because of their fearless testimonies, because even facing death, they did stop testifying what this God has done for us.

Today the world grows more and more hostile to the Gospel. Many have observed that this hatred is so irrational, better understood as spiritual darkness descending upon humanity. The same forces that opposed Jesus would love to destroy His Church. We see it happening around us more and more clearly.

What can we say to our Lord Jesus and to one another? Will we dare to say: "O Jesus, I will never fall away, I will never deny you!" We cannot say that. We shouldn't say that. It would simply reveal our foolish arrogance.

Instead of imagining ourselves to be some sort of mighty heroes of faith, we can listen to Jesus' own words to another apostle, Paul: "[Don't you worry] my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

To which we can then joyfully reply with Paul: "[Then we] will boast all the more gladly of our weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon us. [...] For when we are weak, then we are strong." (2 Cor 12:9-10)

When they tried to rely on their own strength, the apostles had to run and hide as cowards. When they trusted and relied on their Risen Lord Jesus, they went to the ends of the earth boldly proclaiming the triumphant Gospel to all nations.

Now, trusting in Jesus, they finally could fulfill their promises, given on that last evening. Not one of them fell away. Instead, they all, except John, indeed, died with and for Jesus, but not one of them denied their crucified and risen Lord.

The same Lord Jesus, who called them, has handpicked us, each one of you, to be His disciples. The same Lord comes to us and dwells with us and assures us. "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) "[And] I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb 13:5)

We are who we are, but our Lord and our God is faithful. He will never abandon us. He will strengthen us. He Himself will walk with us. He will embrace us with His own Spirit into the wonderful fellowship with the Father and Himself.

He will keep pouring over us His peace and joy, to everyone who is humble enough and willing to receive His divine gifts. He Himself will help us to shine brightly in this beautiful world which keeps descending into darkness.

Will we stay with Jesus? Time will tell. But one thing is most certainly true. Jesus will stay with us. Regardless of how many times we fail Him, He will always be here to lift us up, to bind our wounds, to take away our guilt, to cover our shame, and to remind us – that we are His own, and nothing in entire creation will be able to separate us from His love. Take heart and rejoice! Amen.