

“The impossible mission” John 6:35, 41-51

“Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the Prophets, ‘And they will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! How do we feel when Sunday is approaching? How do we feel on Sunday morning, getting up and getting ready to attend the Divine Service? Do you feel excited and thrilled, overjoyed and humbled that you have been found worthy to be invited by the Triune God to the special place where He Himself comes to serve you? Is that a fitting description of how we feel?

I would guess that most of the time that is not how we feel. But we should. Indeed, that is how we should feel. Because you have received this underserved grace of the Triune God, you have been mysteriously handpicked by Him so that you could enjoy the fellowship with Him. What an incredible privilege!

I invite you today to reflect on three things. **First**, on how we often think about this whole Church thing. **Second**, what Scripture teaches about the Church's realities? And, **third**, how should we respond to the grace that we have received?

First, how do we often think about the Church and about our being here, about us being Christians. From our human perspective it looks pretty straight forward: we do the whole thing, we decide to participate, we come, we prepare, we worship, we serve, we pray, we learn, we give, we reach out and witness. Good Christians.

But the thing is, that from our limited, very limited human perspective we don't see, we can't possibly see the full picture of God's involvement with us. That is impossible for any human being, unless the Word of God reveals it to us.

And that is true for pastors as well. How do we often see our calling? Despite what we say we believe; we cannot remove from our hearts the trust in ourselves. We are idolaters. We want to believe that we are in charge. That we are going to bring people into God's family. We will succeed. We will make the difference. We will build and expand the Church for Christ. Perhaps it is not happening yet. No worries! We will work even harder.

Longer hours. We will do more. We will write better sermons and will lead more interesting Bible Studies. There will be more activities in our congregations, more conversation with people. So, we keep pushing.

And we certainly are helped by congregations in this false trust in ourselves. When pastors are called, congregations have these hopes – now this pastor will be able to turn things around, to reach out, to be so charismatic that people will stream to us, he will preach like Jesus did. So, no pressure...

Pastors on the other hand hope that if only we can get more people hyped up and passionate about changing the world and bringing revival to this congregation, then... eventually that will happen. Things will get better, people will come. Again, no pressure at all...

Thus, we keep hoping; congregations expect from pastors the impossible and pastors expect the same from their members – to gather the harvest, to bring in new converts, to grow the congregation. And when it doesn't happen, despite our best human efforts, we may get disillusioned with one another. Useless pastors, useless congregations...

But what does today's Gospel reading teach us about these matters? This is our second topic for reflection. What does the Scripture teach us? That the reality is not what it appears to us. This is what Jesus said repeatedly. **"No one can come to me, unless God the Father draws him."**

Now one can choose to become a Christian. You cannot make anyone a Christian. Neither can your pastors. **"Unless God the Father draws them..."**. Nothing else will do. Just remember what events John the apostles described before this speech of Jesus took place. Jesus was healing people.

Thousands and thousands were streaming to Him. May seem like a huge success story. But then... then Jesus opened His mouth and spoke the message that He had come to bring us. And what happened?

Remember? **"When many of His disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'"** Only a few remained with Jesus. **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."**

This is what pastors hear too often when they try to bring Jesus' message to their listeners. "Too hard... too heavy." I guess that explains why today so many churches have chosen to embrace another tactic; let's promise healings and feedings and well-beings and then people will come.

Or let's give people what they want, what they like. And you know what? People indeed go to those churches; they want all that good stuff. But when Jesus wants to speak to them His message... "that is too hard, who can listen to it?"

We just don't realise how bad our situation is, how tragic. We are dead in our sins. Dead! Not sick, not weakened, not a bit gone astray. Our natural state in which we come into this world is this – we are dead in our sins. Period.

We can't fix ourselves. We can't bring ourselves into God's family. We need to be born again. We need to be raised up for a new life. That is quite a massive undertaking. We can't possibly do this on our own, and we can't do this for anyone else. This is out of our reach. This is an impossible mission!

Thus, once the Spirit convinces us of this truth, we may start seeing the fuller picture of God's involvement with us. Then we are awakened to recognize His grace towards us, His passion for us, His commitment to us. The existence of the Church, of us, Christians, forgiveness, salvation, God's Kingdom, you being here and listening to this sermon – all of that is God's doing.

Our God sacrificed Himself in the most unbelievable act of love, when He came as one of us and gave up His life for us so that we could learn and be assured of what His attitude towards us is. He did it long before we were even born.

He did it when we were still His enemies. Rejecting Him, ignoring Him, pretending He doesn't exist. He disregarded all our hostility and disdain. He came into this world looking for us. For you! Nothing could stop Him.

Now, He arranged our life-circumstances in such a way that they lead us to Him. He called us. He sent out His Spirit to dwell with us. He gave you a new life. It is Him who daily creates in you this faith and trust in Him. He brings you into the family of His beloved saints, in the Church.

He changes your heart. He renews you and transforms you. He keeps you with Him and guides you. He never stops caring for you, even when we push Him away. It is Him who protects you and nourishes your faith gently leading you towards the ultimate end. All of this is His doing.

All of this is His love for you at work. From the very beginning till today, and so on until the day when He will accomplish His purposes for you and you will finally see Him face to face as He is in His divine glory and majesty.

How do you feel when Sunday is coming? When you are getting ready for the Divine Service, where our Triune God Himself invites you, so that He can serve you – hear this! So that He can be with you and bless you! – so that He can restore you, and assure you how much you mean to Him.

Your God knew about you from the very beginning. When He created this Universe, He created every atom you have in your body. He knew back then that one day He would assemble all those atoms in one place, to create someone very special to Him, somehow whom He desires to have with Him forever.

And one day, and that day is coming, He will bring the same person, He will bring each one of you where He wants you to be – in restored and renewed creation, where righteousness, joy and everlasting blessedness reigns forever.

This is all His doing. His undeserved gift to us. **How are we to respond to something so, so great and overwhelming? This is our final topic.** See, this is an incredible miracle that you are here. Look around! This is a miracle of our Triune God that these our brothers and sisters are here. That is all His grace. He didn't have to do this, but He chose to.

Now, what is our attitude towards this divine act of such generous grace and mercy? How do we cherish these incredible, priceless gifts of God's forgiveness, of His Spirit in us, of His promises of salvation and eternal life? How do we keep and guard them? How do we respond with gratitude?

Our God, He doesn't stop with choosing us and calling us into His Kingdom. His declaration that you are forgiven, that your sins are taken away, that is not the end of our Christian journey. That is only the beginning of our new life.

Now the Triune God Himself teaches us and instructs us. As, for example, our today's reading from Paul's letter to Ephesians illustrates so well. Our lives are not ours anymore. Everything has changed. You are redeemed, you are purchased paying the highest possible price – God's own sufferings and blood.

So that you could be His own and live with Him forever. Now He sends His Spirit to be with us so that He would help us to leave behind our old manner of life, so that we can put on **“the new self, [which is now being] created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”**

The Holy Spirit has begun in us the work that He is so good at, the work of transformation and new creation, and He invites us to strive to imitate our Lord Jesus. Have you noticed how we say it in our confession, once we have confirmed that we desire forgiveness in Jesus' name?

“Do you intend with the help of the Holy Spirit to live as in God's presence and to daily strive to lead a holy life, even as Christ has made you holy?” Then we usually say ... **“yes, I do.”** But dwell on what these words mean for a moment!

Christ has made you holy... you are in God's presence... and He has given you the Helper, the Holy Spirit... so that you can strive to lead a new and holy life. How? There are dozens and dozens of exhortations in the NT writings, Paul mentions a few of them in our today's reading from Ephesians.

Speak truthfully and in a way that brings grace to others and builds them up. Learn to be generous with your forgiveness and quick to ask for forgiveness when you have sinned against others. Renew the spirit of your mind, be kind and tender hearted, putting away all anger, slander and malice.

Strive to be imitators of our God, as His beloved children, walking in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. So that we do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption, but instead that we would bring much joy to our Father and to our Brother Jesus Christ.

For our God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit has accomplished the impossible mission. He has brought you here and He has kept you in the true faith.

I pray that He also helps us to appreciate all that He has done, rejoicing with the divine joy and daily marvelling at and giving thanks for the grace which He has shown to us.

Amen.