

The Church Year Once Again

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With the observance of Pentecost Sunday, we come to the end of the first half of the church calendar. The second half of the year begins with Trinity Sunday, the Sunday following Pentecost and leads us into what is known as “ordinary time” in the church calendar. The first half of the year focuses our attention on the events of redemption, beginning with the Incarnation and Advent, continuing with Lent, Holy Week and the emphasis on the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. We conclude this period with marking Ascension Day and Pentecost Sunday, events which speak of Christ’s exaltation and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The second half of the church year, which continues until we return to Advent, is a time in which we apply and work out the implications of redemption in our life in Christ. The first half is centered on the Person and Work of Jesus Christ; the second half on our life together in knowing and following Jesus Christ.

The rhythm of the church year is significant in forming our thinking and molding our character as followers of Christ. By observing these days we are enabled to remember what is often not mentioned, or if it is it is done too often in a casual and secondary manner rather than with an intentional and purposeful intent. Many churches today do not mark the church calendar because the subject matter is focused on us and our lives rather than on Christ and the events of redemption. If the Christian life is not rooted in the historical events of redemption, then it is easily reduced to a ‘self-help’ type of living, in which Christ becomes a means to an end, a means to a better, more successful, more fulfilling life now. The gospel begins to sound like a commercial for the all-American life that is promised us in our culture. Health, wealth and prosperity eventually becomes the focus, rather than the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Inevitably the cross is ignored because it does not fit into the pattern of success that is presented to people as the promise of the gospel. But a gospel without the cross is no gospel at all. The cross speaks of suffering, shame, and death. These themes or considered to be too negative in many churches and movements and does not fit with the “theology of glory” that is the underlying message that dominates in today’s church climate. The theology of glory speaks of success, prosperity, unending happiness, and a problem-free life. Life in Christ, according to this perspective, is supposed to be one that continually soars, one that is filled with abundance, and this usually means material abundance, emotional security, healthy living and wonderful vacations with all the accessories!

Life in Christ however is characterized by a “theology of the cross.” Paul’s statements about the centrality of the cross are taken very seriously. Sin is addressed, the sacrifice of atonement is proclaimed, the sacraments are observed, the call to discipleship is understood and life is lived out under the sign of the cross. When Christ returns we will then enter glory. But we are called to “proclaim his death until he comes,” as we are reminded by Paul in the words of institution of the Lord’s Supper. The cross of Jesus Christ is the heart of our message and of our life. 1 Corinthians 2:2, Galatians 6:14

This period of Ordinary Time in the church year is one in which we learn to live out the message of the cross in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is what is meant by living the cruciform life, a life characterized by conformity to the cross of Christ. And this is what it means also to live the resurrection life that is ours in Christ. The Holy Spirit is given for the purpose of bearing witness to Jesus Christ. And a life that is filled with the Spirit is a life that bears witness to Christ in all things.

We learn what it means to be the church, for the community is once again a cross-centered community. We learn what it means to live in our homes as a family. Our personal lives are to be formed and developed as the Holy Spirit conforms us to the likeness of Jesus Christ, a likeness centered in the cross. Philippians 3:7-10 As we approach this time of the church year, I trust it will be a time of growth, of deepening joy and satisfaction as we learn what it means to know and follow Christ. Ordinary time in the church year is not wasted time, nor is it meaningless time. It is a time of tremendous significance as we take what is given us in the work of redemption and integrate into every dimension and aspect of our lives. It is ultimately a time that is more than ordinary, for it a redemptive work of Christ in us as he applies what has been done for us through his unique work in accomplishing redemption. May we embrace this time with anticipation and delight in all that he purposes to do in us in the coming months.