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Signposts and Shadows

Hebrews 10:1-25 &

St. John 19:1-37

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Signposts are helpful in getting us where we're going, but they're not the same as the destination. A few weeks ago we were on our way to Los Angeles. After two days of driving there was a certain amount of excitement when we passed the first sign telling us the distance to L. A. I we were just south of Sacramento at that point. We were still a long way from our destination, but when we passed the sign we knew we were making progress and we knew we'd be there by the end of the day.

Now imagine some naïve traveller heading down I-5 to Los Angeles. Maybe, like us, he was taking his family to Disneyland. But seeing that sign, not understanding that the numbers next to the name of the city represented the distance left down the highway before he arrived at his destination, he pulls over to the side of the highway and assumes that he's reached his destination there in the middle of nowhere in the Central Valley. L. A., he thinks, isn't a very exciting place. They go looking for Disneyland, but they can't find it, not realising that they're hundreds of miles away. Maybe they make the best of it there on the side of the highway or maybe they give up in disgust, turn around, and drive home. Or, maybe, having heard such wonderful things about Southern California and thinking that they've arrived, they naïvely

spend a week there in the middle of nowhere, pretending to enjoy their holiday.

The book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish or Hebrew Christians who were having trouble distinguishing the signposts from their destination. Their problem was spiritual and the writer of Hebrews talks about “shadows” instead of signposts, but I think you get the idea. It seems that these Jewish Christians were falling back into old ways, embracing the shadows of the things that had actually come for real in Jesus. Chances are they were facing some kind of persecution and, being Jews, it was tempting for them to fly under the radar by falling back into their old Jewish ways, but the writer of Hebrews rebukes them and reminds them that the law and the temple and the rituals and sacrifices of the Old Testament weren't the destination; they were signposts pointing to something much better. Camping out on the law and the temple and its sacrifices was like camping around a signpost saying “Los Angeles...400 miles”.

Over the course of Holy Week the Church puts before us for our reading all four Gospel accounts of Jesus' passion. And on each of these days she gives us an Epistle that explains the passion story from a different angle. Today we read the passion narrative that St. John has given us. It's a familiar story of Jesus being beaten by soldiers, of his standing before Pilot, of his betrayal by his own people, and of his crucifixion. Our Epistle from Hebrews 10 explains what the passion story *means*. It explains why we call the day on which Jesus was brutally executed “Good” Friday.

Hebrews—we don't know who wrote it—begins by taking us to the Temple, which was still doing business as usual. In a few years the temple would be destroyed, but at least for a few more years, its priests would continue doing what they had always done. For the Jew, the temple was the centre of the universe. It was the place where God met humanity. It was the place where the priests offered sacrifices on behalf of the people day in and day out. A river of blood flowed, literally, from the temple down into the valley below as animal after animal was slaughtered and placed on the altar. It was as glorious place to the Jews as our greatest cathedrals are to us Christians—probably even more so.

But the writer of Hebrews refers to the glory of the temple as “a shadow of the good things to come”. Where the Jews would have seen the ongoing sacrifices of the temple as part of its glory, Hebrews describes the repetition of those sacrifices in a negative light. “In these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.” As much as every sacrifice offers forgiveness, the person making the offering also knows that he'll be right back in the same place in another year, offering another sacrifice. The repetitive nature of those sacrifices only serves to highlight the fact that they can't truly deal with our sin problem. Verse 4 tells us: “It's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Again, think of the signposts along the highway: “Los Angeles...400 miles” and then after what seems like driving forever through boring scenery that never seems to change you come to the next: “Los Angeles...375

miles”. The signs do show some progress, but the progress is so little that the signposts only really highlight just how *far* you still are from your destination.

The writer of Hebrews then gives us Jesus speaking some words from Psalm 40: “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure....Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

In giving the law, the Lord established the temple and its sacrifices, but Jesus recognised that they weren’t what he really wanted. They were shadows. They pointed to something—actually *someone*—who would come one day to once and for all deal with sin. And so Hebrews gives us reason to celebrate. The writer tells us that because Jesus came and did the Father’s will, he has “done away with the first order to establish the second.” Jesus, in the instant of his death, has taken us from the signpost right to destination. Verse 10 says, “By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ once for all.”

Understood in the best light possible, the old sacrifices only left you sanctified until the next time you sinned and every honest person knew that wasn’t far off. But if you were to really think about it, an honest person understood that the blood of bulls and goats didn’t *really* make you holy. That blood dealt with your guilt legally, but it didn’t *really* take it away and no amount of animal blood on the altar could transform a sinner into a

saint from the inside out. And the writer of Hebrews admits this. He points again to the priest of the Old Covenant who “stands *daily* at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices”, which he says can never *really* take away sins. But—in very stark contrast—when Jesus had offered himself—and he did that in the events we’ve read this week in our Gospel lessons, in the stories of his passion—he made a “single sacrifice for sins” “for all time”. And then it says that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of God.” The priest stood at the altar day in and day out, doing his job of offering imperfect sacrifices. Jesus made that one offering of himself and having completed that perfect and once-for-all sacrifice, he sat down. He took his rest. He mirrors the work of God in Creation. Genesis 1 describes God creating the cosmos as his temple over the course of six days and on the seventh—on the Sabbath—he rested. He sat down on his throne and took up the work of ruling and sustaining his creation. Humanity rebelled. We wreaked havoc in the temple and tried to push our Creator from his throne. We tried to take over the temple for ourselves. And now Jesus has dealt with our rebellion. He’s set the temple to rights and has taken the throne where he now rules his kingdom. Verse 14 says, “By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” Perfect for all time. The work is *finished*. When the priest of the Old Covenant sat down to rest at the end of the day, he knew that in morning more people would show up, needing new sacrifices to cover their new sins. Brothers and sisters, Jesus doesn’t have to worry about being called up from his throne tomorrow

because someone new has sinned and needs a new sacrifice to deal with it. The perfect sacrifice Jesus made at the cross has dealt with it—dealt with them all. It’s done. Once and for all.

And yet as if that weren’t good enough news to turn the day of Jesus’ sacrifice into “Good” Friday, Hebrews goes on. The Holy Spirit bears witness to us if we care to look back again at the signposts: In this new covenant the Lord declares, “I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds.” It’s not just a matter of forgiveness. Yes, we need forgiveness. We need it *desperately*, but the ultimate point of Jesus’ sacrifice isn’t forgiveness. Jesus didn’t die *just* so that you can “go to heaven when you die”. Ultimately, Jesus died to set his temple to rights. He forgives, but he *also* makes new. He writes his law—the law of love that’s exemplified in his giving of himself—he writes it on the hearts and minds of his once rebellious creatures. He washes us clean and fixes us right where we’re broken so that we can once again serve him in his temple. In fact, this time he makes *us* his temple. As I said on Palm Sunday, when Jesus left the Temple Mount on Good Friday and was crucified on Mount Calvary, he shook the foundations of the old, earthly, and imperfect temple. He tore the veil that made the temple what it was. And all that happened as he laid the foundation for a new temple in his death, by which he offers us *both* forgiveness *and* renewal. Through our Baptism he unites us with himself and pours his Spirit into us, making us his temple.

This is why verse 19 gives us such good news: Because of the completed and once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus has made, because we know that he is sitting at the right hand of God, his work completed, “We have *confidence* to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain.” Because Jesus shed his blood for us, we can enter the presence of God without fear of his wrath. Jesus is our great high priest. As St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians, looking back at the whole history of God’s promises in the Old Covenant: All of the promises of God find their ‘Yes’ in Jesus. All of God’s promises and not only his promises, but all of his commands and exhortations to Israel to be a light and blessing to the nations—all of that—is fulfilled in the person of Jesus and now having had our “hearts sprinkled clean” and “our bodies washed with pure water” we are united with him and share in the benefits of his having fulfilled all these things, of his being God’s “Yes”.

That’s the Good News of Good Friday. And so with all this in mind the writer of Hebrews could say to these fearful and questioning Hebrew Christians: “Hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering”. Don’t be afraid. I know that when they come for the Christians, it’s tempting to fall back on simply being a Jew to escape persecution, but *don’t*. “He who promised is faithful.” The Lord placed all those signposts in the Old Covenant and was then faithful to get you to your destination in the New Covenant. Keep trusting him, because he will continue to be faithful to his promises. So instead of being

afraid, hold fast. In fact, he says in verse 24: “Stir up one another to good works” and no matter how scary or dangerous the situation gets, do not neglect to meet together. Some out of fear have stopped coming to church. No matter what happens, don’t abandon the body of Christ. Keep on “encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Jesus will come back and your work now is to help each other as you prepare yourselves and help to establish his kingdom.

In Jesus we’ve reached one destination. Jews thought in terms of the “Present Age” and the “Age to Come”. The signposts of the Old Covenant pointed to the “Age to Come”. In his incarnation and his death and resurrection Jesus inaugurated the “Age to Come”. But now we live in a time where the two ages overlap. The “Age to Come is here and gaining steam. The “Present Age” is dying, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t sometime do its worst to hold on. The new signposts point to the day when Jesus will have put every enemy under his feet and when God is all in all. His people will face trial and tribulation as we make our new journey, but we need to make the journey together and we can make it in confidence knowing that because God has been faithful to everything he has promised so far, he will certainly be faithful the rest of the way.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, your Son was willing to be betrayed and given into the hands of sinners, and to suffer death upon the cross for our sake. Teach us to walk in his way and give us the grace necessary to give ourselves for

each other and for the sake of the world around us. Let us find strength and boldness in the cross and let us always be faithful to be your Church: meeting together, loving and exhorting one another, and being light in the darkness. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.