Quinquagesima Sunday
Bessemer 1958

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IN NOMENE JESU

Romans 5: 8 But God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

THE LOVE OF GOD AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST

The season of Lent is once again upon us. Once again we are preparing to follow Christ along the "Way of Sorrows" and kneel down at the foot of His Cross to watch the soldiers drive the nails through His hands and feet, watch the blood-thirsty mob mock Him, buffet Him, spit in His face, watch the blood flowing so freely down His face, watch Him suffer and die. And in what more appropriate way could we begin this journey than with these words of our text? - But God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. This text is such a beautiful, soul-saving, faith-strengthening Gospel message, such pure Christianity, that the devil will do everything in his power to keep our minds diverted and unreceptive. Perhaps he will tell us that this is such profound theology that we cannot comprehend it, or perhaps he will suggest that the truth of our text is an abstraction which no no relevancy to our daily needs and our daily problems. Or, what is most likely, he will whisper the thought into our hearts that in our text we have something which we have heard a hundred times before -- a thousand times! The love of God, the death of Christ, the sin of man -- what's new about that? A sermon on such a text, he will say, is bound to be repetitious and monotonous, empty of any significant meaning for our lives, of little interest, of no real concern to us. The devil is half right: there is nothing new about the theme that is before us this morning. We want to consider the subject: The love of God and the death of Christ, and what will be said on this subject will undoubtedly be repetitious; in fact, some of you have heard this same message for fifty years and more. So far the devil is right: there is nothing new about this message of our text. But he is altogether wrong when he says that this message has nothing to do with our needs, that it is of no concern to us, that it has no meaning for our modern lives. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts to this wonder-Gospel message and bring unto our lives through this Word of God the heavenly peace and power and love that we all need so very much.

First of all our text calls attention to the truth that God was in Christ. The holy writer says God commendeth His love...in that,,.Christ died for us. The presupposition is this that in Christ God was incarnate. In other words, it was the Son of the living God who died on Calvary's cross. At Christmastime we marvel each year at the strange and marvelous Gospel that the Child in the manger is the eternal Creator, God manifest in the flesh. It is even more astounding to look to Calvary and see the crucifixion in all its indescribable horror and know that this bruised and bleeding Man suffering the agony of shame and guilt, exposed to the contempt and derision of a mocking humanity -- that He is God manifest in the flesh! It is the most startling truth in all Scripture but it is one that we must understand in the Lenten Season lest we think of Christ as a hero or a martyr - lest we begin to pity Him whom we are to worship and adore! Hold to this truth that the Lamb of God was the Son of God! The crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ was not a tragic accident, or a brutal crime -- it was a pre-ordained triumph, a magnificent victory over the forces of darkness and of hell! The agony of Gethsemane and the ordeal of Golgatha -- all the sickening pain and loneliness of His death -- all was a part of the wonderful plan of redemption, a plan of redemption that was carried out, and that could have been carried out, only by the Son of God who took upon Himself the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men... and humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross! It was Christ the Lord who was nailed upon the cross!

Again, note that He was nailed upon the cross for you and for me. Chris died for us, says out text. We call this the Vicarious Atonement, a phrase which unfortunately has only a vague meaning even to most church people. Actually, the vicarious atonement is nothing other than the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. I don't mean to suggest that that is easy to understand! That the Lord Jesus Chris the eternal Son of the living God, should as my Substitute endure the torment of my thransgression, that He should die in my stead, that my guilt should be transferred to Him, that He should be forsaken of His Father so that I need never be forsaken--

that is a Love so amazing, so divine that I shall not in all eternity be able to comprehend it. With my mind I shall never understand this love, but with my hear I cling forever to this Gospel that Christ bore our sin in His own body on the tr

He died for us, our text says, while we were yet sinners. Sometimes y read of a mother whose children are trapped in a flaming building and in her fran tic effort to rescue them she herself perishes. Or perhaps you recall stories of two boys who go swimming and one of them in an effort to rescue his drowning companion, dies in the attempt. Such heroic and self-sacrificing deeds deserve our admiration but we must not assume that they are comparable to the death of Christ While we were yet sinners -- that is a truth which reminds us that there was noth ing whatsoever in us that could explain the atoning death of Christ. Far from be ing the friends of God, we are by nature at enmity with God. Sometimes we concei of ourselves a pitiable creatures, fallen from our holy estate, victims of our ow sinful passions, at the mercy of the forces of evil that hold us in bondage, and begin to feel very sorry for our ourselves, poor sinners that we are! And soon w begin to imagine that God could not help feeling sorry for us too -- and that's w He sent His Son into the world, and that's why the crucifixion took place. Here again we have an instance of a half-truth. We are pitiable creatures. We are helpless victims of our sins. And God is sorry for us to an infinite degree! Bu that is not the whole story, and we shall never behold the central mystery of the cross until we understand that our sin is not only a disease but a debt! We are not only sinful wretches; we are sinful rebels! In our natural hearts there is hatred and rebellion against our Maker. Our deepest degradation is not our moral frailty, nor even our moral depravity; it is our animosity toward God, our proud resistance of His grace, our hateful contempt of His Gospel and His love. And it is for us that Christ died while we were yet sinners.

That is why the Cross of Christ is the revelation of God's love to us. It is because we deserve damnation and receive salvation, because we deserve noth ing and receive everything, because we deserve to be cast off forever but instead

are drawn to God through the Crucified. Thus, the cross has become for us the symbol of the unmerited and everlasting love of God. God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. In the cross God not only proclaims His love, not only demonstrates His love, but acturally makes good the promise of His love, actually offers His love.

In many ways the will of God is hidden from us. An earthquake destroy an entire community and without respect of persons takes the lives of hundreds; w cannot understand that. Wars and rumors of war continue generation after generat ion and the innocent suffer with the guilty; we cannot understand the purpose in these things. And in our personal lives there are tragedies so bewildering, so apparently sneseless, that we can only cry out that the ways of the Lord are past finding out. Yes, for the most part the will of God is hidden, but in the death Christ we are given a revelation of the love of God so wonderful that it will con sole us in every time of sorrow or perplexity, and comfort us in every hour of fe God exposes His heart to us on Calvary! His judgments are still unsearchable, an His ways past finding out, and in our lives there are still mysteries that baffle us, but we have discovered in the Cross of Christ that God loves us. God commend eth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us! Are you in sorrow and in need of comfort? - turn to the cross and know that God loves you in Christ! Are you alone and fearful, troubled by a sinse of anxiety and insecurity? - turn to the cross and know that God loves you in Christ! Are you frightened by the rapid flight of time, advancing old age, the certainty of death, the prospect of eternity? - turn to the cross and behold your Savior dying in you stead, and know that God loves you in Christ!

It is strange indeed that in the cross we should find our peace; that here we should discover the love of God. Here on Golgatha have converged all the evil forces in hell and in man. Here is a scene from which we are inclined to tu our eyes in horror. The monstrous brutality of the crucifixion! The inhuman con-

tempt of the pelple! The indescribable shame that Christ was asked to bear! I ask you to name any other hour in the history of our race that compares with this in evil. This is the darkest hour in the story of man, the hour in which the noblest Person who ever walked the earth is destroyed by the fiendish fury of man's wickedness. There have been those who have looked upon that scene and have found in it the justification of the unbelief - how can a man believe in a good God in a world where the cross of Christ is possible? These are the same people who behold the misery and injustice in human life, the sorrow and the pain that men must bear, and then conclude that there is no God. But you and I know that beyond the mysteries that baffle us there is the fact of our Father's love. You and I know that it is in the cross of Christ that we find the fullest revelation of God's love. We know that when everything seems to go wrong in life and we are tempted to become bitter and despondent, and we need to be comforted and strengthened by the knowledge of God's love, He points us to the cross, and there amid all that darkness and shame and horror we learn that God commendeth His love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us!

Amen.