

Good Friday

Bulletin

Audio

'They will look on him whom they have pierced.'

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In the depths of the Dark Ages, the recently converted Germans cut down the sacred groves of their gods, and with the wood, began to erect for themselves strange churches. Not built in the classical manner, they lacked the rounded arches, the towering domes, the smooth thick walls, the wide, open halls, the ornate gilded iconography of the Roman cathedral.

Rather, these sanctuaries were vaulted, and covered in towers, crowned with spires which pierced into the sky. The pillars holding up the long, narrow ceiling were skinny and long, as if the building itself were malnourished. As opposed to the walls being a thick, strong bulwark, they were thin, almost frail, barely held up by a series of ribs exposed on the outside of the building, the so called 'flying buttress' which gave the entire structure the look of a skeleton.

The Roman churches were shaped in resemblance to a basilica, that is, the court of a Roman emperor. They consisted of a vast open room to hold the beseeching masses with an apse on the far end where the judgment seat of the ruler would be nested, though where the seat would be, there was instead an altar; and where the ruler would be, there was a bishop.

These German churches were not so. Rather, they were shaped in the form of a cross, an image of the very instrument of torture that brought about the death of the Lord; this image which we gaze upon today. The altar was no longer at the far end of the building, for all to face, but in the center, to be surrounded on one side by the congregation, on another by the clergy, and on the remaining two by the organ and choir.

Whereas the exterior of the Roman church was decorated with images of the saints, with grapevines and fields of wheat, with doves and hares, lions and lambs, fish and rushing rivers, all symbols of the Christian faith in various ways, these sanctums of the Northmen were covered in grotesque and writhing imps and demons and monsters, the so called 'gargoyles' whose heads and gaping faces sat on every corner and call of the emaciated structure, vomiting out rain water fed into them by a series of gutters which lined the rather unimpressive shingled roofing.

The civilized Romans found these buildings disgusting, unfitting of the dignity of Christ and of the glory of the Father, and so they designated them as 'Gothic,' a reference to the heathen barbarians which caused the fall of the great Empire, for only such an ignorant rabble could have designed and willingly worshipped in such a architectural monstrosity.

These Germans did not believe their churches to be just as beautiful as those in Rome. They were not merely lacking artistic sense. They just did not believe that beauty was the point of the building.

Rather, to them, the church was the Body of Christ which laid upon the holy altar, and there is no body of Christ save that one which suffered upon the cross. So it seemed proper that the altar lie at the beating heart of a cross-shaped building, with all the laity, and diaconate, and the clergy surrounding it, as limbs and beating organs being fed from the blood which flowed therefrom.

It is true that the walls looked skeletal, for the church was meant to look like Jesus, the Jesus who hung upon the tree, which is to say, it was meant to look like a corpse, scourged, bloodied, with flesh torn off and bones exposed.

Instead of being round and sturdy like the Roman church, showing the permanence of God's kingdom in the world, every spire of the Gothic church reached toward the sky, a crown of thorns upon the head turned toward heaven, for the prayer of Christ's suffering to God was the very purpose for why the lost would flock into this cruciform house: *'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.'*

Indeed, we are lost in ignorance, and never *know what we do*. Every day we awake, and seek to be what we consider to be a 'good person,' yet in every way we simply live seeking our own pleasure, our own satisfaction, our own pride. We

cannot give to others without losing, so we keep for ourselves. We cannot help others without depriving ourselves, so we indulge. We cannot forgive others without hurting ourselves, so we hold grudges, we hate, we loath.

Indeed, it does hurt to forgive. For when we are wronged, we are hurt. Revenge is only natural, even satisfying, for it is to take that hurt which we received, and heap it back on the one who injured us. To forgive is to keep that pain for ourselves, to bear it ourselves, and instead to return kindness to our enemy. To forgive is not simply to forget, to brush it off, to let bygones be bygones. It is to suffer the evil of another. If one cannot give back the wound he receives from another, he has no choice but to carry it himself.

The church is the body of Christ, it is the flesh and blood of the Christ that prays *'Father, forgive them.'* And so it must be shaped like a cross, for Christ's forgiveness is no different than ours, at least in this one respect.

His forgiveness is no mere forgetting. Rather, the Lord Jesus must suffer, and not merely suffer this or that slight or umbrage. Rather, He must suffer the sin, the malice, the hate of the whole world, for all sin we have ever committed against our neighbor is in reality a sin against Him. *'Against you O Lord, against you only have I sinned, and done what is wicked in your sight.'*

You fight with your spouse, and to win an argument, dig up some ancient wrong he committed against you, that you might prove him to be lacking in decency. It feels good in the moment to get your way, but then again, most slander feels good to the one doing the slandering; and it is not you who must bear the sin of the lash of your tongue, but rather the back of the Lord, opened and bleeding upon the pavement of a public whipping post.

You ignore your family, your friends, your work; like the prodigal son, you squander your talents, and the effort your parents and teachers poured into you; you burn your limited number of days, all a gift from God, on television, on videogames, on sports, on idle speech, on idle time, on idol worship. You waste away, yet it is the body of Christ which shall have everything stripped from it, first His clothes, then a scarlet cloak, then His skin and flesh.

We hurt others, though we always claim it is unintentional. But we know what we do when we refuse help to one who never helps us, we refuse charity to the one who didn't show up in our time of need, we refuse kindness to the one who weeps,

but who never wiped away our tears. In this way we think we prick our neighbor's pride, we stab at their conceit, we strike at their vanity, we put them in their place. But rather we prick only the brow of our Lord with a thorn; we stab only the hands of Christ; we strike only the face of the living God. And it is only fitting that Jesus be fitted with a crown of thorns, for we will not stop at piercing Him only once.

'The devil made me do it' you say. And it is true, for you are children of your father, devil, and of your mother, the viper in the garden. And you only do their will, for you honor your father and your mother.

Therefore, look on him whom you have pierced! His back wrecked and wet, His bones exposed, with your scourgings as He bears the cross of your wrath; His hands bloodied by nails of your malice as He is bound forever to the tortures of your malice; His mouth beaten and swollen as you speak the words of your slander. His blood dripping from His brow into His eye, that He might forever see the transgression for which He must now die.

'Behold, your king!'

'Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!'

'Shall I crucify your king?'

'We have no king but Caesar!'

Does He look like a king? Not at all. What He looks like is a Gothic church.

This night, our Lord will suffer, just as you made Him, and our Lord will die, just as you wanted. He will descend into hell, where most assuredly you belong, *the unquenchable fire prepared for Satan and all his angels, for when you sin, you merely act as good children of your father, the devil.* Yet He does not go down to the pit as a beggar, a wretch, but as a man going forth to war. For indeed, it is written: *'Pontius Pilate asked, 'So you are a king?' And the Lord answered, 'You have said so.'*

It is proper that a king fight on behalf of his people, and so He goes, and so He will fight, against the devil, the jailor of mankind, our accuser, and against the grave, the prisonhouse of all the sinful; for the church of His body is not yet complete.

Though, like a Gothic church, He is torn, weak, emaciated, His bones exposed, His flesh pierced; He still is yet to be adorned with heads, even heads on pikes. The heads of His enemies, *and with the last enemy, which is death.*

It only seemed fitting to the recently converted Germans that their newly erected house of the one true God should be a fortress against the hateful and pagan gods, or demons, of their past; so it was that, like a good fortress, it should display the figure of slain gods upon its walls. These, the so called gargoyles, were the trophies that the Christ, by His cross, had won in battle; and no longer would their mouths speak lies, but spill out the waters of baptism which fill the font of the sanctuary, and the heart of every baptized Christian which sings the Lord's glory therein, *a spring springing up to eternal life.*

The Lord Christ now descends into hell, a trophy to win, a head, like Goliath's, to cut off, as the true Son of David, and bring back to the cross-shaped throne room of His church, that its lifeless eyes and shocked brow may gaze upon the holy altar, the sacred font, the countless mass of the forgiven, fortified with the body and blood of the Eucharist; that the word of the prophet might be fulfilled:

'They will look on him whom they have pierced.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: