

Christ is risen. Alleluia.

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

In our Gospel, Jesus admits it ... he uses figurative language. He told the disciples today: *"I have said these things to you in figures of speech."* Some churches and people boast about interpreting the Bible literally. Obviously, it can't be done all the time, not and make sense of the text.

Jesus spoke in figures of speech — παροιμίαις in the Greek. The lexicon defines this word for our purposes here in John as a "dark saying, figure of speech, in which esp. lofty ideas are concealed" (BDAG *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2nd Ed., p. 629). There are dozens of figures in the Bible; some kinds you know like similes and metaphors, but some have long names that I have to look up when I come across them: asyndeton, hendiadys, metonymy, synecdoche, etc.; one author identified over 200 of these figures used in the Bible.

These figures are often meant to conceal. Jesus said it about the parables He taught — a parable is one of those figures of speech you know about. Jesus told the disciples: *"To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand'"* (Luke 8:10).

And even the disciples didn't always get the point of Jesus' parables. We can struggle, too. For example, Jesus taught: *"What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches"* (Luke 13:18-19). Okay?! "What does this mean?" — to use a good Lutheran phrase. I'm often glad when the disciples ask Jesus to explain His parables; as He does, He is explaining it to me.

So, figures of speech — including Jesus' parables — conceal; but they can also reveal in marvelous and memorable ways. Who doesn't remember the Parable of the Sower? A sower goes out to sow seed and the seeds fall on different kinds of soil. Or the Parable of the Lost Sheep? A sheep wanders off, and the shepherd leaves his herd for the sake of the one lost sheep.

Or, consider the Psalms. How many times do the psalmists write using similes? Psalm 1: the blessed man *"is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season"* (v. 3). Psalm 17: David's deadly enemies are *"like a lion eager to tear, as a young lion lurking in ambush"* (v. 12). Psalm 22: David describes Jesus' crucifixion saying, *"I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast"* (v. 14).

Or consider John's vision in our Epistle. John paints us a picture of what he saw, but he has to use picture language — figures of speech.

Today's Gospel is the night of Jesus' betrayal. Thus Jesus tells the disciples, "*I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father.*" As Jesus approaches the climax of His coming, the completion of His purpose for coming, Jesus stops trying to conceal with His words. He begins to speak plainly.

Yes, Jesus is deadly serious and speaks plainly to the disciples about who He is and what He came to do. He told them plainly that He came from the Father and came into this world. He is telling them and us here plainly that He is the only-begotten Son of God who came down from heaven to be conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Blessed Virgin. Receiving His flesh from her, the Almighty Son of God was born of Mary as a helpless little infant, was wrapped in swaddling cloths, and was laid in lowliness in a manger — plain, clear incarnation language.

Jesus told them plainly, on the other hand, that He would also be leaving the world and returning to the Father. That is, after accomplishing all that He came to do, namely "*overcoming the world,*" defeating our enemies — sin and death and Satan — Jesus would ascend back to the Father to sit again at the Father's right hand.

It wasn't as if until now Jesus was always speaking in figures of speech. On more than one occasion Jesus told of His Father's plan of salvation plainly to the disciples: "*The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised*" (Luke 9:21-22); "*Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men*" (Luke 9:44); "*the Son of Man ... will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise*" (Luke 18:31-33). Plain crucifixion language, plain resurrection language, not figures of speech, though the disciples "*did not understand [even these words, for] it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it*" (Luke 9:45).

Surely, that the disciples didn't understand is understandable to us ... none of it had yet happened. Surely, the disciples heard the words and were in denial — they didn't want it to happen. Matthew records Peter rebuking Jesus and saying: "*Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you*" (Matt. 16:22). It was hard for them to believe.

But we live on the other side of these monumental events. We pass each year through Holy Week; we hear each year of Jesus' great sacrifice for us, offering up Himself unto death to deliver us from the plague of our sin. And then again, each year, figuratively, on Easter morning, we get up early on the third day to go with the women to the tomb and find it empty. Figuratively, Jesus appears to us, huddled in the closed room with the other disciples. Figuratively, we see His wounds and touch them. And not in figures of speech, but in plain language, we know and confess: "Christ is risen! Alleluia!" We hear; we understand; and we believe.

Moreover, with these events as the backdrop, we know that Jesus spoke plainly too earlier on this same momentous evening, as He broke bread with His disciples and offered up His Last Will and Testament to the Church. For when Jesus said, "*This is my body which is given for you,*" and "*This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you*" (Luke 22:19-20), He wasn't using figures of speech then, either. He meant what He said. He gives us His very own body and blood, offered up on the cross, for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. That's what we receive today at this altar ... not a symbol, but the real thing.

Dear saints, God speaks to us through His Word; that Word important. It's powerful. Sometimes He speaks in figurative language and sometimes He speaks plainly. Regardless, let us listen to it — whether from Moses, or the prophets, or Jesus, or the evangelists, or the apostles — for these words are spirit and they are life (John 6:63). And let us pray for the Holy Spirit, that He clarify this word, illumine our hearts and minds, and strengthen our faith. For some of this word is hard — what is written in figurative language, for example. Or what blows against modern cultural winds.

You may not understand it, at first. You may not want to receive it. But engage with it; study it; ask questions about it, and more and more with the Spirit's help, you will come to understand it better — both the figurative language and the plain language — and you will understand that it is God's will for you. You will be strengthened in your faith; you will be assured of the forgiveness of your sins and of your salvation, and you will find that, in a world filled with tribulation, you will have peace in Jesus Christ, who has overcome the world and has given you His victory.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!