

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

You've heard the saying: "Appearances can be deceiving." Certainly, that's so with God. The coming of the Son of God as an infant could deceive one into thinking He was helpless. The Holy Family's flight to Egypt could deceive one into thinking He was powerless. Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan could deceive one into thinking that Jesus needed repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Jesus' appearance as a man could deceive one into thinking that He was no one special. As Isaiah prophesied: "*he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him*" (Isa. 53:2).

So it is with Jesus' cross. Surely, Jesus spoke blasphemies that deserved death. Or surely Jesus was a rebel, seeking to overthrow Caesar and establish His own earthly kingdom. Surely Jesus needed to be made an example of, shamed on this instrument of torture and terror. How could the death of such a person become the source of our salvation? How could the preaching of a cross be anything but folly?

But those questions pour forth from human wisdom, and it turns out that that is actually what is foolishness. "*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart,*" the prophet Isaiah wrote. God makes foolish the wisdom of the wise, St. Paul says, yet this is what people want rather than "*the law of the LORD*"; this is what our flesh wants — money, power, notoriety, influence. Repent!

"*Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,*" and God supplies the opposite ... Divine wisdom: a babe in a manger, an itinerant preacher with no place to lay His head (Matt. 8:20), a crucified Savior, and for us in His kingdom, who follow Jesus' call to take up our cross, blessedness hidden in opposites.

That's how Luther talks about this Divine wisdom. We see it in Christ's "human nature, weakness, foolishness," he wrote. We recognize God "in suffering," "hidden in [Christ's] suffering," "in the humility and shame of the cross" (LW, 31:52-3). Ours is a hidden God, as the prophet proclaimed: "*Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior*" (Isa. 45:15).

And this is for our good, that He might bless us with His grace and mercy, that we might not seek after Him in glorious signs and wonders, or in "*lofty speech or wisdom*" (1 Cor. 2:1), but in the shocking glory of our Savior lifted up on a cross. We are to look for God in no one else than Jesus Christ, the crucified, who "*though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Luther says: "true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ" (31:53). Thus, Jesus said to Philip: "*Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*";

and to Thomas: “*No one comes to the Father except through me*”; and yet again, “*If you had known me, you would have known my Father also*” (John 14:9, 6-7).

Crosses are also part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, as He taught: “*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me*” (Matt. 16:24). And St. Paul says, have this same Christ-like attitude. “*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*” And then, “*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 2:2-5). And then Paul points us to the servant Jesus, come in the flesh, to the servant Jesus, humbling Himself to the death of the cross.

Jesus teaches this kind of attitude in His famous Sermon on the Mount. He speaks of the blessedness of believers found in faithfully following the lowly path Christ Himself blazes:

in poverty of spirit after the humility of Jesus, repenting and trusting in Jesus who by His grace brings us into His kingdom;

in mourning, lamenting our plight due to sin and its consequence, death, but being comforted in our salvation in Him who died in our stead and rose triumphant from death and the grave;

in meekness, not self-promotion, but denying ourselves, and praising instead Him who in meekness ascended the cross and rose again, that we might rise with Him and be given an eternal inheritance — blessed, indeed: “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*” (Matt. 25:34);

in hungering and thirsting for righteousness, living godly lives in faith and in service to our neighbors, desiring no other reward than to hear the commendation of the Master: “*Well done, good and faithful servant ... Enter into the joy of your master*” (Matt. 25:21);

in showing mercy; even as we have received mercy from our God, so He calls us to show mercy — not “*burnt offerings, with calves a year old*,” not “*thousands of rams*” or “*ten thousands of rivers of oil*,” not your “*firstborn for [your] transgression*”; God Himself offered up His only-begotten Son for our salvation, and He instructs us: “*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*” (Matt. 9:13);

in purity of heart, that is, “*in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*” (Heb. 10:22), rejoicing in God’s grace by word and sacrament, and eager for the

consummation of all His promises, when we shall rise up from death and shall with our own eyes see our Redeemer face to face (Job 19:25-27);

in pursuit of peace, in the model of Him whose coming was announced by the Prophet as the “Prince of Peace”, and by the angels as the one to bring peace. And so our Lord did, “*delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification,*” and through faith in Him, we have peace with God (Rom. 4:25–5:1). More than that, we, who have been reconciled to God, have also been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18);

and in steadfastness in the face of persecution, reviling, slander, suffering — not in retaliation or revenge, not reviling or threatening, but rejoicing that we, too, have been “*counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name*” (Acts 5:41);

All hidden under the cross. The cross is our theology, Luther once said. The cross is our life — the blessed life of faith, as Jesus says, trusting in His promises. There is nothing for us to boast about. What we have has been given to us; we receive it with thanks, boasting in the Lord alone, in His cross and in His grace, and responding with a God-given zeal to do what the Lord calls good: “*what does the LORD require of [us] but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God?*”

God grant it ...

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