

The Festival of St. Henry of Finland, Bishop and Martyr
St. Matthew 16:24-27
January 19th, 2025
St. Bartholomew Ev. Lutheran Mission, UAC
Fort Myers, FL
Pastor Jerald Dulas

If Any Man Would Come After Me

In Nomine Iesu!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Sermon Text:

“Then said Jesus unto His disciples, ‘If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it: and whosoever shall lose his life for My sake shall find it.’”

Prayer in Pulpit before Sermon:

O Lord, send out Thy Light and Thy Truth, let them lead us. O Lord, open Thou my lips, that my mouth may show forth Thy praise. O Lord, graciously preserve me, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected. Amen.

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior + Jesus Christ. Amen.

My dear friends, our Lord + Jesus says in the Gospel reading for today from the Apostle and Evangelist St. Matthew, “If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” Our Lord mentions a cross, this is meant to bring to our minds His own cross. Our Lord + Jesus suffered and died because He preached and taught the truth. The truth was that He was the Son of God made flesh. He was the Anointed One, the Messiah, sent down from Heaven to redeem mankind from their sins. The religious leaders of His day rejected Him as their Messiah. In their jealousy and hatred, they had Him crucified on the tree of the holy cross. This is the cross that should come to mind when we hear our Lord say, “take up your cross.”

A cross is what those who follow the Lord will receive. This is because it is what our Lord and Master received. No one is greater than his Master. We who profess to be Christians should expect to endure a cross for being a Christian. That cross may be a greater or lesser burden depending on the individual. Our Lord allows us to bear a cross, not only to remind us of the cross that He bore to redeem mankind from our sins, but He allows us to bear a cross so that our faith may be tested and proved. He man bears the cross that is fit for him. Some will endure greater hardship and persecution in this life. Others will not. But those who through faith have determined to follow after the Lord must expect a cross. We must expect persecution and hardship in this life.

This is because the devil, the world, and even our own flesh hate us. They hate all that is holy. To be holy is to be without sin; to hate sin. This holiness does not come from within ourselves. No, it is solely a gift of the Holy Ghost, Who works through the means of grace to sanctify us, that is, to make us holy. He makes us holy by clothing us in the righteousness of the Christ. It is His works that we bear. We have no holiness in and of ourselves. Any holiness or righteousness that we have is merely a reflection of the holiness that has been gifted by the Holy Ghost. Our righteousness is that of the Christ’s. Just as we bear His cross, we also get to bear His righteousness. To follow after the Lord means that we not only bear His cross, but also bear the gifts that He won for us upon the tree of the

holy cross.

This should serve as a great comfort to us when we do endure the cross and suffering of being a Christian. For, as our Lord says, our lives are nothing if we do not have faith in Him. This world offers nothing that is greater than the eternal reward in Heaven. All earthly riches, fame, and honor pales in comparison to what joys we will have when our Lord calls us out of this vale of tears to our eternal home in Heaven. When we endure a cross. When we experience persecution and shame for being a Christians this is the hope to which we should cling. We should look to the life to come, not the life that is present.

This is why we celebrate the saints who have gone before us. For, they give us an example of great faith in the midst of the crosses that they bore. They remained steadfast and faithful unto death in the midst of great persecution. They remained faithful even when they were killed for clinging to the Gospel of our Lord + Jesus, the Christ. Today, we celebrate the Festival of St. Henry of Finland, who was a bishop and a martyr. He is, perhaps, not as well known of a saint to us as other saints may be. Therefore, it is appropriate to present some background on this saint.

St. Henry is called “St. Henry of Finland.” But, he is not actually from Finland, he was born in England. In 1153 he had followed Cardinal Nicholas Breakspear from England to Sweden—again, not yet Finland. It was there that he was made bishop of Uppsala, Sweden. This is why he is sometimes referred to as St. Henry of Uppsala. While bishop of Sweden he accompanied King Eric of Sweden to Finland on a military conquest. King Eric feared an attack from the non-Christian Finns, and in order to protect Sweden, went and conquered that land. After King Eric won that civil war, St. Henry decided to stay in Finland. Though he stayed in Finland he was never made bishop of Finland. He remained bishop of Uppsala, Sweden. This is why he is referred to as bishop. Also, after the civil war, King Eric and St. Henry baptized the people and built many churches. This was done in many cases without the Finns approval.

This is what eventually led to his martyrdom. The cover art on the front of the bulletin depicts his martyrdom. He was killed by a man called Lalli. There are two versions of how this came to be. The first one is that his wife, Kerttu, falsely claimed that St. Henry, after leaving their manor, had taken, and eaten all their provisions. Lalli, in a rage, immediately put on his skis and set out with his axe to murder St. Henry. The other is that St. Henry had attempted to place ecclesiastical punishment on Lalli for being a murderer, and in a rage, he killed St. Henry. Which shows that not all rides in one-horse open sleighs are as great as the song may suggest. His death was on January 20th, 1156. In the Swedish calendar this date actually fell on the 19th of January, which is why we celebrate this festival on this date.

St. Henry serves as an example of remaining faithful unto death. He did not give consideration to his own life and safety over the expansion of the Christian Church in Finland. Even after his death, it would still be many years before the Christian Church was established in Finland. King Eric would be killed ten years later, and it became one of the bloodiest times in that area’s history. The kingdoms of Sweden and Finland became strongholds for the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Lutheranism became the official religion of those lands, and the pure teachings of the Christian Church were preached and taught in those lands up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the leaders of those churches pushed for more modernism. Today, the Church in those countries has forsaken the truth of the Gospel for all things worldly.

Of course this serves as a warning to us. For without strong, faithful Christian leaders—without faithful ministers calling men to repentance for seeking after the things of this world—the Church is doomed to abandon her first love and chase after every vain, worldly philosophy. Again, the words of our Lord from the Gospel reading serve as a warning to us. What does it matter if we gain the whole

world but lose our life, our eternal life that is? This world is fleeting. It will pass away. There will be a new Heaven and a New Earth on the Last Day. This evil world will go the way of all things. But even before that comes to be, all the earthly possessions that we hold dear in this life will not be taken with us when we die. All of our riches, fame, and honor will not matter when we have died. Even the men who this world praises as “great men” are soon forgotten. And by it their earthly lives are rendered as worthless.

This is not the case with our spiritual lives. All the gifts that we are granted by the Holy Ghost through faith. All the gifts that our Lord + Jesus won for us who believe on Him by His death on the holy cross can never be taken away from us. We will carry them into the next life. But we cannot expect to continue to keep these gifts without the devil, the world, and even our own sinful flesh warring against us. They seek our eternal demise. Therefore, they will continue to persecute us and lead us into hardship and pain. But, my dear friends, these crosses that we bear for following after the Lord + Jesus will only last for a short time. Even if they last for the rest of our lives, they pale in comparison to the eternal joys of Heaven.

The crosses that we bear in this life and world have also not been the same as some of the saints who have gone before us who were martyred for their faith—martyred for bringing the Gospel to those who would not receive it. They gladly and willingly took up their crosses and followed the Lord + Jesus. Let us also take up our cross and follow after the Lord + Jesus. For He has the Words of eternal life. Only in Him is salvation, eternal salvation. For those who endure the promise of a crown of life will be given. St. Henry of Finland, Bishop and Martyr received the crown of life on this day, January 19th, in 1156 AD. After our earthly life has run, if we remain faithful unto death, we also will receive a crown of life.

Therefore, my dear friends, let us take up our cross and follow after the Lord + Jesus. For whatever persecutions and hardships we may endure in this life are nothing compared to the eternal joys that await us in Heaven. May the Lord + Jesus come quickly and take us from this vale of tears to our eternal home in Heaven. In the Name of our Lord + Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Prayer in Pulpit after Sermon:

Almighty God, be pleased to accompany Thy Word with Thy Holy Spirit and grant that Thy Word would increase faith in us; bring into the Way of Truth all such as have erred; turn the hearts of the unrepentant; and for sake of Thy Name grant succor to all heavy hearts and those who are heavy-laden, that they may through the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ be relieved and preserved so that they succumb not to the temptation of despair but rather that they gain the victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil; through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who liveth and reigneth with the Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever One God, world without end. Amen.

The Votum:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!