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Lenten Sermon 7: The Sign of Power: Matthew 28:18, 1958

O.P. Kretzmann
Valparaiso University

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THE SIGN OF POWER

Matthew 23: 18 And Jesus came and spake unto them saying,
All power is given unto Me in heaven and in
earth.

At first glance this would appear to be a strange text for a Lenten sermon. These are words spoken by our Lord several weeks after the darkness of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. And yet, just because of this, they are worthy of our thought and meditation even today. They are true, eternally true, because of Maundy Thursday. The events of that dark and lonely night clearly reflect the truth of the words of our text: "All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth." These words are evident in our Lord's farewell address in which He unrolled the carpet of history. They are the undertone of His high priestly prayer in which he carried the Church of all the tomorrows to His heavenly Father in petition and far vision. They are very real in the first direct contact with His enemies. They become clear in His majestic and powerful silence before those who were killing Him, in all the minutes and hours of that lonely, tragic, and victorious night. Here we see, now more surely than ever before, that the sign of the Cross, even at its darkest moment, is the sign of power.

It is very easy for the seventieth generation of the men and women after the Cross to lose the vision of its continuing power and victory. We have seen the tremendous contradiction between the faith proclaimed by the Church and the faith by which men and women actually live and die in the streets of a mocking world. We see the tremendous odds against which the Church of God must fight--the crushing weight of a decaying world, the
awful gap between the faith we profess and the faith we live. We know that the things for which we stand and the faith by which we live are today openly hated and despised and cursed just as they were when men and women screamed their hate and defiance of God under a cross nineteen hundred years ago.

There is therefore always the immediate and imminent danger that our personal lives and the life of the Church will be dominated by a crippling spirit of doubt, anxiety and fear. There are many who feel that there is only weariness in the years before us, --the pitiful stirring of burnt-out ashes of fires, the deadly routine of tending altars which the world has forgotten. We live in a world without much hope for a better tomorrow.

Such a spirit of doubt and fear is not Christian. It certainly should not be part of our memory of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. There is a continuing power about the Cross which towers over the momentary wrecks of time. Everything else may change. The truths by which men attempt to live may sink into chaos and night, the world may grow weary and old, but in the Cross of Jesus Christ is the fountain of eternal power and everlasting youth. The year of our Lord nineteen hundred and fifty-nine is still under the sign of the Cross--the sign of power!

Although the Church seems to be beaten back from one area of human life and after another, apparently lives only on the crumbs of men's time and talents, it is nevertheless true that as long as she lives close to the Cross, she is the most powerful phenomenon in the modern world. The Scriptures testify to the fact that the entire period of the New Testament Church, which began with the sunrise of Calvary and will end only with the last red sunset of the world, is a day of power and victory. "All power is given unto me!" As members of the
Church we stand in the long tradition of the day of power against the night of weakness which men have made for themselves. As we sing our hymns and speak our prayers on Maundy Thursday and all other days of the year we are in line with all the true power of two thousand years -- the sudden light over Bethlehem, the Man from Nazareth who spoke words as yet never man spoke, the dark hour on Calvary and the glorious hour in the resurrection garden, the long years with their red line of saints and martyrs, the conquering faith of crusader and scholar and reformer, -- all these testify to the continuing power of the Cross. They lived under the sign of power!

Today we may sometimes feel that the center of power has really finally shifted elsewhere. Surely men no longer live and die for God and Christ and His Church. They live by guns and fear and hate. They follow hypnotic voices shouting to the ends of the earth. And yet again and again the continuing power of the Cross demonstrates itself in the lives of men. It is strange how often modern man, pausing for a moment in the madness of life without God, sees the power of the Crucified on the dark horizon of his world. Somehow he seems to know that the figure of the Son of God bearing the sins of the world is the answer to all the problems which trouble and perplex the souls of men. He feels something which he has lost. It is this sense of power which the Church in our time must again recover and proclaim to a dying world. We must again be stirred by our Savior's words: "All power is given unto me."

We must be alive to the promise of the Cross, that by its everlasting power it can make, through the forgiveness of sins, our succession of common days a triumphant march to a better world and the high fulfillment of our cross-given destiny. Seeming defeat will be turned into victory. Human indifference and
human bitterness will only cause us to turn from earth to heaven, and our human weaknesses will compel us to turn to the Cross for strength and hope and power.

The life of the world and the individual proceeds by two's. There is an evident duality in life--body and soul, good and evil, light and darkness, night and day. One day this duality will end. There will be only one victory--and it will be ours! Through the shadows of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, through the darkness of the evening time of the world, our eyes must be fixed once more today on the Cross of Jesus Christ, eternally young, eternally strong, and finally eternally victorious. It is the great continuing sign of power!

And now the strange, mysterious thing about all this is that men must be driven to their knees before they can really see the ultimate meaning of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Driven to their knees by the consciousness of their sin, by the breaking down of fellowship with God, they are completely ruined. Sin is bad in the world, worse in the Church, and worst of all in the relationship between God and man. Have you ever noticed how every reference in Holy Writ uses this picture? Sin is wandering, loneliness, going away, going astray, separation. There is always the same tolling theme! We have lost the power to make our life strong and full of hope.

On Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we see now the amazing, humanly incredible, sign of the power of the Cross. This is the power and miracle of forgiveness, the restoration of fellowship, the return to the Father's house. In our Lord and Savior's suffering on Calvary our brokenness is healed and our union with God and man restored. Our great separation, so long now and so
bitter, has been ended by the reunion with God through Jesus Christ. The bonds of sin are loosed. We have again the freedom beneath and beyond all human freedoms—the freedom from fear of sin, the freedom from want of God, the freedom of worship of God, the freedom of speech to God! Maundy Thursday and Good Friday tell us that this is an accomplished fact. We are facing a finished redemption. In our time, too, many men have made an effort to make our faith a quest instead of an achievement! As Christians we must say to them that in contrast to all other religious systems the faith of Christianity is a fact, done and complete, and not a search for higher truth.

The essence of Christianity is that something has been done and nothing remains to be done. It is finished—holy, powerful and perfect!

And how that message fits into our world with its haunting sense of incompleteness of unfinished faith, of broken dreams and lost hopes. This is our faith: "Only once in the long story of our incompleteness there was one task that was done completely, finally, and absolutely." It remains now as the last continuing sign of power over the world. Our Lord's atonement gives us the power to stand up before God, ladies and gentlemen of His choosing, unashamed and unafraid. This is the heart of our great faith. It is good for us to remember it once more this Maundy Thursday and to live by it—and perhaps to bring it to our world, however haltingly and humbly, so that others, too, might come under the sign of the power of the Cross.