

There is a word that St. John uses in his Gospels to describe Jesus. He calls him the only begotten. He is the only begotten of the Father. He is the only begotten Son. He is the only begotten God. This term is very important, because it teaches that Jesus, the Son of God, is the same substance of his Father. God cannot have part of his substance taken away from him. If he has begotten someone from himself, then this someone is also God, the same God, the same substance as the Father. Jesus isn't just an adopted son of God. He isn't reborn into God's son, like we are through baptism. No, he is the only begotten Son. He alone was generated out of God from eternity. He alone shares all glory with the Father from before the foundations of the world. He alone shares with the Father the same Spirit who proceeds out of both of them. So when the Father gave up his only begotten Son into death, he was giving his very heart, his dearest treasure, who shares everything with him.

St. Luke uses this term in his Gospel as well. Except Luke uses it to describe some of the people whom Jesus helped. In Luke 9, we read about a boy who is possessed by a demon. The demon has complete control over the boy, throwing him into convulsions and onto the ground. St. Mark tells us that the demon would often throw the boy into the fire or into the water. With his child as good as death, the father begs Jesus to help him. He says to Jesus, "He is my son, my only begotten!" In Luke chapter 8, we meet a leader of the synagogue named Jairus. His daughter has fallen sick, and she is very close to death. This time, Jesus goes with him to his house, and by the time they arrive she is already dead. But Jesus raises her from the dead. St. Luke tells us that Jairus begged Jesus to come to his home because his only begotten daughter was dying.

These two fathers were in terrible sadness and helplessness over their children. The one's son was controlled by the devil, and the other's daughter fell prey to death. It's difficult not to feel for these parents. The great grief they are carrying comes out in this one word: only begotten. Each of these two fathers lost a part of himself. Each was helpless and unable to help his own flesh and blood. Each found salvation in Jesus. These two fathers didn't find help in their own abilities to protect their children. Instead, they grieved over their only begotten son and daughter, they learned to trust in the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

This morning, we consider another only begotten one, described for us in the seventh chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. This was a young man, the only begotten son of a widow. And he lay dead in an open coffin. This poor woman has lost her husband and her son. Luke doesn't even tell us that the mother is crying. All he tells us is that Jesus tells her not to cry. Was she balling her eyes out? Or was she so worn out by sadness that she had no tears left to shed? Who knows how many tears there were? Only God knows that. What we do know is that a part of her lays dead right in front of her. Her boy, who received his life from her own body, is now lifeless.

So Luke records, "When the Lord saw her, he felt sorry for her." He had compassion on her. His inward parts were moved. That's literally what Luke is describing here. The Lord, who was born of the substance of his Father from eternity, was born of the substance of his mother at the fullness of time. There, in his mother, he received a real human nature, with a real human heart, liver, stomach, and bowels. And when he sees this woman struck with the grief of death, his stomach and insides turn. This is much more than some pity from a distance. No, this is real grief. Our Lord feels compassion. He suffers with this poor mother.

Jesus knew what his own mother was told when she dedicated her holy child at the temple. The prophet Simeon told her that a sword would pierce her own soul. Mary would see her own son

whipped, insulted, nailed to a cross, and die. And Jesus knew that he would be forsaken by his own eternal Father, bearing the wrath of God as he took the place of every sinner. He knew what lay ahead for him in Jerusalem. He knew that he would taste death on behalf of everyone. Everyone is born in sin, held in bondage by the devil. Jesus knew this. And this is why his insides were moved. This is why he showed compassion. He, the only begotten Son of the Father, true God of God and Light of Light, knows the feeling of death. He knows our guilt, our sin, our regret, our helplessness, and everything that condemns us.

So when Jesus tells this woman not to cry, he is speaking as the one who knows his own mother's grief. He is also speaking as one who knows the great compassion of God. He is God. He is the mercy of God, the heart of God, the only begotten of God. Not only would he be cut off from his dear mother who bore him in her womb, but he would also be given up by his own Father who bore him from eternity. Our human reason and sympathy can't even scratch the surface of such grief, that the only begotten God would bear the wrath from the one who begat him. This world mocks it as divine child abuse that the Father would give up his only Son. But they don't know the compassion of the Son. They don't know the love and mercy and grace behind these words of our Lord, which he speaks to this poor woman: Do not weep. Human wisdom cannot fathom this great wonder, that the only begotten Son of the eternal God would taste death for every sinner of all time. But Christ does fathom it. As surely as he is God, the only begotten of the Father whose kingdom rules over all, he bore the sin of the whole world. He felt every bit of God's anger and just punishment against every sin. He counts every tear. He who knows the very mind of the Father, who shares the same wisdom and will and glory and Spirit of the Father, also knows what troubles your heart as your true Redeemer and Brother.

So Jesus went up to the coffin and touched it. He touches death, showing that he would embrace his own grave. To touch a dead body made one unclean for a day. This would slow you down and force you to hold off on certain work you wanted to get done. But death does not slow the Lord down. Instead, death comes to a halt at his touch. And the words he says to this young man have the same power as the words he said to the poor widow. He speaks with authority: "I say to you!" It's as if he were saying, "You have heard that death is your prison and death is your lord. But young man, I say to you, arise!" Jesus is contradicting death. He is overruling death. He is showing what he would do for all people by tasting death for all sinners.

The dead young man sat up and started to talk. We don't know what he was saying. But the point is that he was talking. Immediately, Jesus gave this woman everything she had lost. Just like that, she had that part of herself given back to her – her boy, his body, his face, and his familiar voice. Here our Lord teaches who he is and why he came to earth. As he says in the fifth chapter of St. John's Gospel,

I tell you the truth, the hour is coming and is here now when the dead will hear God's Son calling them, and those who hear him will live. As the Father has life in himself, so he has given the Son the power of having life in himself. (John 5:25-26)

Jesus is begotten of the Father from eternity. And with this same life he has always shared from his Father, he gives us eternal life. He touches death, bearing the sting of sin in his own body, to give us back to God. He delivers us out of the darkness of sin and death to be nurtured by our mother in the safety of his church by his Word and sacraments.

The fear of death is how the devil keeps people in bondage. This isn't just the fear of the end of your life. It's everything leading up to death. We fear the loss of our health, wealth, and earthly comfort. We fear pain and suffering. This fear is nothing more than unbelief. But Jesus teaches us not to fear those who can only kill the body. Instead, fear God. He is the judge. He has the authority over death. As Psalm 130 says, "In You there is forgiveness. Therefore You are feared." And as Psalm 34 says, "Those who fear the Lord lack nothing good." So after the crowd saw Jesus raise this young man from the dead, they learned to fear God instead of death. They learned that someone much greater than death had arisen among them. God himself has visited his people. To know him is everlasting life. And the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Of course, it's still true that we experience sinful fears in this life. The thought of dying is frightening. The thought of your own child dying is even more frightening. But if God is the one who gave you your life, your children, and all you have, then who is there to fear but him? And if he did not spare his only begotten Son but gave him up for us all – if he has begotten us by his Word to be his children – then certainly he will give us all we need as we look to the resurrection of our bodies and the life of the world to come. Amen.