

“He Will Guide You into All the Truth”

In the name of him who turns our sorrow to joy, dear friends in Christ: This morning’s Gospel reading might be a little confusing. Because several weeks back we celebrated Easter, and since then we have been hearing about the post resurrection appearances of Jesus, it’s natural to assume that when Jesus speaks of his going away for a while where his disciples will not see him and then returning so they can see him, he’s talking about his ascension into heaven and his triumphant return in glory. That would seem to fit with where we are in the church year.

But that would be wrong. No, the reading we heard is part of Jesus’ discourse in the upper room in the hours before his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane later that night. We’re doing a flashback. And so the “not seeing him” and then shortly thereafter “seeing him again” that he’s referring to is his death and burial in the tomb when he would be taken from their sight and his subsequent resurrection when he appeared to them again on the third day.

Likewise when he speaks of how they will weep and lament while the world rejoices and how their sorrow will be turned to joy, he’s referring to the events of Good Friday when they stood watching in horror as he was crucified and killed, and the following Saturday they would spend overwhelmed with grief and disillusionment because they did not believe, and then the great joy they would experience when – despite their incredulity – they did see him alive again.

We hear Jesus telling his disciples these things in advance not so much to prepare them for what is about to happen. At this point, nothing can do that. The reason is they do not believe what Jesus been telling them all along about his messianic mission to suffer and die for sin and to rise again. Indeed, at this point they are incapable of believing it. Their minds are completely closed to the spiritual truths he is teaching them. Their heads are filled instead with false fantasies based on a total misunderstanding of the Holy Scriptures. These fantasies tell them that what they are to expect is a restoration of the earthly kingdom of Israel, one that far surpasses the glorious heights it attained under the reigns of David and Solomon nearly 1000 years earlier. What it means for them and the for rest of their people is worldly wealth, power, and glory – the things that all people crave in this life, the hope they cling to that cannot be dislodged by any merely human means.

Spiritual truths can only be apprehended by those to whom the Holy Spirit has been given. And at this point that hasn’t happened yet. It hasn’t happened because the sacrifice of atonement has not yet been made. It’s only after Jesus dies for sin and rises again, after sin’s terrible price has been paid, after his soul cleansing work is done, that the Holy Spirit can take up full residence in the hearts and minds of people to turn on the light, so to speak, so that they can understand divine truths – divine truths that have been there in plain sight in the written Word of God all along, but never rightly understood.

This is why Jesus prefaces his remarks to his still unenlightened disciples by saying, “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” This is why too on the evening of the day of his resurrection when Jesus appears to his disciples who are cowering in fear behind locked doors, one of the first items of business for him is to breathe out the Holy Spirit upon them. Then, St. Luke tells us, “He opened their minds to understand all that is written in the Holy Scriptures concerning himself.” Ah! Now we get it! Now we understand what he was telling us. We didn’t

understand at the time. We remember sitting there scratching our heads at the words he spoke. But now it all makes sense. He foretold what was going to happen. It was the divine plan of salvation all along. We didn't see it then. But now we do. And it's a lot bigger than we imagined. It's not about restoring an earthly kingdom to Israel; it's about building an eternal, heavenly kingdom that reaches into all the earth – wherever people gather around God's Word and Sacraments and by the Holy Spirit receive the gifts of grace, forgiveness, and life that Jesus died to achieve.

Still, it has to be said, there was a learning curve. Old ideas die hard. Old prejudices are slow to be overcome. It took time for those first Christians to come to understand that Gentiles – that is, non-Jews – were also to be included in the covenant of God's grace. Even though the Old Testament Scriptures are filled with such prophecies, the Holy Spirit had to guide them into this truth, as he did with Peter and his vision of the sheet descending from heaven that opened to reveal all kinds of unclean animals. The Spirit tells him, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." No, Peter replies, I've never eaten any unclean thing. "Don't call unclean what the Lord has made clean" the Spirit tells him. The next thing you know a very reluctant Peter is in the home of a Roman centurion proclaiming the Gospel – a man Peter would have rejected as unclean. And when the Spirit comes upon him and the members of his household and they believe, Peter is astonished. He smacks his head and declares (I'm paraphrasing here) Huh. Who'd have thunk it? God doesn't play favorites. The Gospel is for people of every race, tribe, and nation.

Likewise it took time for the Spirit to lead those first Christians to the truth that the Old Testament ordinances like circumcision, the sacrifices, the dietary restrictions, and the Jewish feasts and festivals – they had all been fulfilled in Christ Jesus and were no longer to be observed. The Spirit led them to it by degrees, some being enlightened before others – and still others stubbornly resisting what the Spirit was revealing to them.

There are other examples of the Spirit guiding the early Church to understand divine truths, but what I want us to recognize is that this work of the Spirit continues even today. It's important for us to remember that the default position for the sinful human mind is to misread and to miscomprehend the divine truths written in Holy Scripture. The things of the Spirit can only be understood by those who have the Spirit. Critics of our Christian faith love to pull passages out of context – both grammatically and historically – and present them as reasons to deny, argue against, and mock the things we believe. The temptation for us is to respond with anger and to fight back with the same sort of tactics. It's the wrong approach. It only justifies their hostility toward us. Instead we need to learn patience. We present the truth with kindness and love, praying that the Holy Spirit will use God's Word and our witness to enlighten darkened minds. Specifically, rather than get involved in endless arguments over difficult passages that really amount to red herrings, we need to turn the conversation to the basics, namely to the problem of human sin and its solution in the love of God who gave his Son to save us. The Spirit's work on the unbeliever begins there. Only after that hurdle is cleared, when the Spirit convicts a person of their sin and brings them to faith in Jesus, do the rest of the pieces begin to fall into place.

We need also to recognize that because we still have a sinful nature, there is a part of us that is inclined to misread and misinterpret the Holy Scriptures, and to misapply them to our lives. This is the part of us that remains, as the disciples before their coming to the truth, very worldly – focused on the here and now and on living a comfortable, care-free, and happy life. And so when that part of us hears, for example, Jesus tell us that he will give us whatever we ask for in his name, it thinks, "Oh goody. I'll ask for this and this and this – all this stuff that will

make my life in the present better.” This is pure selfishness. It isn’t at all what Jesus means; but that’s the way the sinful nature wants to take it.

What we should be praying for are those things that matter the most. We should be praying for the Holy Spirit to guide us into all the truth; the truth, for example that we are all still very much works in progress, that our understanding and our sanctification and our holiness of life are lacking in countless ways and can by continued diligence be much improved; the truth that instead of focusing on things worldly and temporal, we should be setting our hearts on things heavenly and eternal; the truth that all around us are people in darkness dying who might be brought to light and life by the Holy Spirit through our witness.

Therefore to God the Holy Spirit let us pray now and always, that he would guide us into all the truth. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!