

Jesus Out of Sight

In the name of him who makes all things new, dear friends in Christ: “A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me.” So spoke our Lord Jesus in this morning’s Gospel. The section we heard is only a small part of a much larger discussion that he had with his disciples in the upper room where they had gathered to celebrate the Passover on Thursday night of Holy Week. By the time he gets to this part of the discourse, it’s late in the evening. The festive meal by which God’s people remembered their deliverance from bondage in Egypt is over, and Jesus’ mood has darkened. He’s become much more solemn and serious. He has much to say to these men who have been with him since the beginning of his ministry ... but not much time left, so he gives them some last minute instructions to prepare them for what’s about to come. For from here they will go with him to the Garden of Gethsemane where, this very night, he will be arrested. Before the sun rises, he will have been condemned by the highest court of the Jews. Around 7:00 am Pilate will condemn him. And by nine in the morning he will have been beaten, flailed, and nailed to the cross. Less than twenty four hours after Jesus speaks these words, his cold, mangled corpse will be sealed in the tomb. So when we hear him say to his disciples that “in a little while” they won’t be able to see him, it’s pretty clear *that’s* what he means: his upcoming death and burial. It fits also with the rest of what he says: how the world will rejoice while the disciples are full of sorrow, and how after another “little while” their sorrow will be turned to joy – clearly referring to the delight they will experience when they see him after his resurrection.

As usual, the disciples don’t understand. Though he has told them repeatedly that he’s come here to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise again, they stubbornly refuse to allow it to sink into their heads. Every time he mentions it, they just sort of space out, scratch their chins, look uncomfortably at each other, and in their minds file this information under “eccentric things Jesus keeps saying that don’t meet our expectations”. Once stored there, they promptly forget it. It’s not until after the resurrection that it makes sense to them. Even then Jesus has to remind them, “Don’t you remember how I kept saying these things to you?” Whereupon they say, “That’s right. You did.”

So what we see in the disciples is a certain filtering process. They seem especially attuned to hearing Jesus say positive things; but they consciously suppress anything that sounds unpleasant, difficult, or sad—especially as it pertains to their future. They don’t want to hear about him being out of their sight for any period of time. They don’t want to hear that in God’s kingdom sorrow, suffering, and humiliation come before joy and exaltation. They don’t want to hear that the cross comes before the crown.

Looking back at them with the advantage of nearly two thousand years worth of 20/20 hindsight, it amazes us that they could have been so dense. We who have the whole story of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection wonder how those who were with him could have failed to understand what now seems so obvious to us—at least as it applied to them. What we have a little more trouble with is how it applies to us.

You see, when Jesus says that for a little while he’ll be out of sight, and that his disciples will mourn and lament while the world rejoices, and that tears and sorrow come before joy, he wasn’t *only* referring to what was about to happen within the next few days. Sure, that’s the immediate context – but we would make a big mistake if that’s all we got from what he says because he’s not just thinking of his upcoming passion and death; rather he is giving us a description of the entire life of a Christian.

Christ our Lord had to face the cross for our sakes before he was exalted, and he bids those he calls to be his disciples to take up their own crosses and follow him. What that means is that there will be for us times when Jesus is out of sight, times when we have to endure oppression and opposition at the hands of the world, and times when the going is hard and painful. But just as it was necessary and ultimately beneficial for us for Jesus to go to the cross, it is also necessary and beneficial for us to undergo various kinds of burdens, trials, and hardships like he did. The Lord uses them to teach us discipline. He uses them to cause us to seek him in his Word and so grow in our understanding of him and his will. He uses them to teach us compassion for others who are suffering. And he uses them to perfect our faith – precisely so that our sorrow will be turned to joy when we are received by him into his eternal kingdom.

The first disciples learned this through their experiences in the time after the Lord's ascension into heaven. Once again Jesus was out of their range of vision. But though they could not see him, they knew they had a job to do. And facing all kinds of peril and threats they set out to do what Jesus had directed. This is what the book of Acts is all about. And seen in this light, what's recorded for us in that book are the series of labor pains that resulted in the birth of the Christian Church. First the disciples face persecution in Jerusalem. They are beaten, arrested, and a few of them are killed. But that doesn't stop them. Instead it causes them to become even bolder – which results in more people hearing the Gospel. Others flee the persecution – and in the process take their faith in Christ to other places where new congregations spring up – and so even more people are exposed to the Gospel. And there's also a deepening of understanding of God's mercy and his plan of salvation that takes place.

We heard an example of that in this morning's reading from Acts. The apostle Peter is under fire again, this time not from his enemies; but from some of the leaders of the Church. They're angry that Peter has shared the Gospel with Gentiles. To them it's unthinkable: "We Jews are God's chosen. How dare you take what God has given to his children and throw it to Gentile dogs!" They have a mind to expel Peter from the Church for this offense. Fortunately Peter is able to persuade them by explaining how God led him to see the truth that his kingdom is open to all. This is a hard pill for the Jewish Christians to swallow – it means giving up their sinful pride and their cherished feelings of superiority—but they must pass through that pain and difficulty in order that they may in the end rejoice that "Even to Gentiles God has granted the repentance that leads to life."

That doesn't seem like such a hurdle to us – but it was to them. And of course, the difficulties didn't end there. There were other trials as well. The Apostle Paul's ministry especially is a catalog of hardships. He is frequently beaten, starved, cold, sick, persecuted, and in prison. He's even shipwrecked a couple times. At the same time, through all these trials to him is given the ability to best understand and articulate the savings truths of the Gospel. And his ministry is representative of what the other disciples endured until they were all, with the exception of St. John, killed for their witness to Christ. It's been accurately said that the seed from which the Church grew was the blood of the martyrs – all of whom suffered terribly "for a little while" in this life, and who have now been received into their eternal home where there is neither mourning nor crying nor pain any more.

We know this. It's the history of our Church. And yet we often fail to see that it's more than history – it applies also to us. But we don't like to hear that. And so, like the disciples listening to Jesus in this morning's reading, we tend to filter out the parts we don't want to hear. We want to be good faithful Christians. That's what we'd all say, sure; but we sure don't want to put any effort into it. We're always looking for the spiritual equivalent of the short cut. It doesn't exist.

And look, if God is going to wipe away our tears as he promised, it means that we must have been crying, struggling, dealing with hard issues, and suffering sorrow and setbacks. As much as we'd like to skip that part and get to the good stuff, we can't. In order for us to grow and be productive for the kingdom of God, there are going to be times when the going is difficult, times when we don't see the face of Jesus so clearly or feel his hand of protection as firmly as we might like, and times when we are brought to our knees in sadness and despair – because it's at those times that he is able to lift us in his strength to new heights.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Earlier in this service we had the confession of sin and the absolution. Later we will participate in Holy Communion. We do these things often, and as a result we tend to take them for granted. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about when I say that at times you find yourself just mouthing the words and going through the motions without thinking about it. But you know too that there are other times when through various circumstances and difficulties the Holy Spirit has worked in your heart to make you more acutely aware of your guilt and sin. At such times Jesus seems awfully distant. And how sweet it is to be released then, and hear the Lord's forgiveness spoken through his called servant; and then to receive to yourself the very body and blood of the Savior. It's when you know firsthand the sorrow of sin and not seeing Jesus for a little while that you are given the grace to rejoice all the more at seeing him revealed again "for a little while" in the bread and wine.

And then last week was Good Shepherd Sunday. We read together the 23rd Psalm with that line that says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." It's a passage that has sustained many Christians in life's toughest moments up to and including the hour of death. It says several things: first that Jesus is leading the way. If we're called to pass through one of life's dark valleys, it's because the Shepherd has decided to take us there for our own good. Second, it's dark in there, so the shepherd is out of sight. The point is that even though we can't see him, we know he's there – it's like we can hear the tapping of his staff on the path as he walks. At such times you can bet that the sheep are going to draw closer to the shepherd knowing that no matter how dark it gets, he is able to protect us from the dangers that lurk in the shadows. Finally, there is the knowledge that he knows where he is going. Even though we can't see what's up ahead, we know that our Good Shepherd has already passed through the valley of death's shadow and has come out alive on the other side – and so will we if we stay close to him. Then, after the darkness, we'll be able to step out into the light with him and see him more clearly than ever before.

That's what happens as Christ draws us closer to himself through the hardships we face in this life. And that's what will happen when very briefly we lose sight of Jesus when we close our eyes in death. But then our sorrow will be turned to joy. Our hearts will rejoice, and no one will ever take our joy away.

Looking forward to that day, may it be that we repent daily of the sin of rejecting the hard road and always looking for the easy path instead. May it be that we are given the grace to boldly confess the name of Christ and our faith in him even in the face of opposition and persecution. And may Jesus grant us his Holy Spirit to continue to lead us into all truth so that we receive in faith all that He would have us know that we may be equipped to better serve him in time and eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!