

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Easter, April 13, 2008

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“A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.”

Days before his death, Jesus warns his disciples of the coming tragedy. He begins to prepare them for the harsh fact of his crucifixion. His veiled message speaks of a day soon coming in which his followers shall weep and lament while the world around them rejoices. And yet, as we begin our fourth week in the celebration of the feast of Easter, why are we given this sudden reminder in today’s gospel of the anguish and suffering associated with the events of Good Friday?

Here we are in the midst of the festival of the Resurrection and the lectionary points us to a passage in the Gospel of John preceding and foreshadowing the events of Holy Week. Upon reflection, I wish to offer the following thoughts as one possible explanation of the apparent disjunction between this Sunday’s gospel reading and our current season in the church calendar.

The sequence of events, which took place in Holy Week, was of a very peculiar kind. Though occurring once at a specific point in the course of history they were of such consequence and magnitude that they could not be confined by time; rather they pierced it, permeated it and filled it. Once and for all Christ’s death and passion endowed earthly time with its definitive meaning. We who are alive today can experience the events of Holy Week in at least three different, though related ways.

First, we can experience them as past historical events having occurred in first century Palestine. As the creed says, Jesus was “crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;” a specific Roman governor whose era and locale can be plainly traced. In this most basic understanding, we could not have been present to witness the full weight of these events, but can hold them in remembrance as distinctly important in the history of mankind. And yet this comes to be in some way disappointing to the devoted follower of God. How are we to develop and maintain a personal relationship with a man we have never met; one that in fact lived and died two millennia before any of us set foot on the earth? How are we to feel the full weight of his passion and death being at such a distant remove from the events themselves?

The answer to this dilemma lies chiefly in the sacramental life of Christ’s Church. This is the second manner in which we today can experience the events of Holy Week: sacramentally. Three short weeks ago we as a congregation ourselves walked through the events of Holy Week. These were not merely days of remembrance crafted by men to remind us of an historical occurrence; they were our participation in Christ’s triumphal entry and subsequent betrayal, his suffering and his crucifixion, and finally his glorious resurrection on the third day. Even as a Jewish rabbi could confidently say “he is no Jew who has not set foot in the Red Sea,” so the Christian Priest can echo, “He is no disciple who has not stood at the foot of the cross.” Indeed, this is as well the function of the liturgy on a weekly basis. What is the sacrament of communion if not our ongoing participation in the death of Christ; that singular event in human history which pierces the sequence of time itself to extend salvation to all ages?

On Maundy Thursday, still a day before the fixed moment of his crucifixion, Jesus lifted up bread and wine at table with his disciples and declared the elements to be his broken body and shed blood. Even so, in but a few moments, two thousand years later, a priest in this very room will do the same declaring to us, "Behold the Lamb of God! Behold Him who takes away the sins of the world!" This is indeed a peculiar practice we have as Christians, and it is often little understood by both those within the church as well those without. We make the claim to be Christ's witnesses left behind for a time on this earth to declare his works. Any sensible man could reasonably object, "What could you possibly have witnessed? You yourself have never seen Christ." But of course we have; of course we do; and of course we will again.

Finally, there is a third manner in which we today experience the events of Holy Week. If you'll recall, our initial question was why it is that in the midst of Easter we are still presented with the pains of Good Friday? One possible answer lies in the fact that Holy Week is not only a past historical event and a sacramental reality in the present; but also in it the entire drama of human history has been encapsulated and vividly enacted. Humanity's longstanding rejection of God was literally personified in the Jews' denial of their awaited Messiah. Jesus' death was the crowning symbol and inevitable conclusion of mankind's original sin in the garden. We now live in an age where Friday has already come. Our Lord has been crucified and the mark of the cross still hangs over this world. Sunday has not yet arrived, at least not in its fullness; we earnestly await the resurrection of all things.

Our current existence corresponds to the indeterminate state of Holy Saturday, in between crucifixion and resurrection; death and new life. Even so, we the church are in the midst of the joyous celebration of Easter, but have not yet experienced that Great Easter which is to come. Having been witness to the resurrection of Christ, born as the first fruits of them that were dead, we still await the Resurrection of all things. As St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying which is written, Death is swallowed up in victory." And yet, for those of us alive today, it is still but Saturday.