

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Easter,

3rd May 2020, at St. John's Church, Savannah, Georgia.

Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you. John 16:22

Ye now therefore have sorrow – that speaks to us now. Thank goodness, at St. John's we have been lightly afflicted by the novel coronavirus itself – and yet we have not gone unaffected by the lengthening shadow of our mortality, the loss of jobs, the damage to business and livelihood, the loss of community, and of our gathering in one place at one time with one accord in prayer. At a deep level these losses have perhaps brought us more grief than we may realize, a grief that demoralizes, depresses, discourages frustrates, and drains us. Among all the uncertainties we face, the one certainty is that a return to what we think is “normal” will not happen soon, if ever – a new normal is emerging, and adjusting to that will have its challenges.

I don't want to belabor this experience of loss and grief – there are so many who suffer far more acutely than we do -though I think it is important for us be aware of something that may be happening in us emotionally; but it is a real point of connection with the sorrow the disciples are just beginning to feel at the last supper, in today's gospel lesson. Jesus has told them he is about to leave them, and go to the Father - *a little while, and ye shall not see me, and again a little while and ye shall see me* – and they are filled with the consternation. They had committed their lives to him, invested their hopes for the future in him – and his going from them, their loss of him, could only be traumatic. The word to describe them is *forsaken* – the word Isaiah uses to describes the church under God's chastisement: *as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when [she was] refused* [Isaiah 54:6]. It's this experience of being rejected, abandoned, forsaken, that at the heart of their grief.

Like a wise and empathetic counsellor, Jesus gently warns them of what to expect: *ye shall weep and lament*. Their sorrow at his death will be made all the more acute by the triumphant gloating of the unbelieving world which crucified him - *the world shall rejoice*. Yet the world will not have the last word: *your sorrow will be turned into joy*; and he illustrates this promise with the parable of the woman in labor: who has *sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world*. The very thing that causes a woman such pain, is the very thing that will turn that sorrow into joy, the birth of a child. Likewise for the disciples – the very thing that causes them sorrow, the great forsaking of the cross, will bring them joy. And it too, will be a kind of new life, a new birth.

The comfort therefore that Jesus offers them is not of a swift return to “normal”, of everything getting back on track, but rather a new and astonishing joy that will emerge through and from the sadness of loss and forsakenness. And this is where the parallel with our own situation breaks down - because Jesus is not providing psychological grief counselling to help the disciples cope with the transition from the old normal to the new normal – he is offering them and us a new relation to God that is everlasting. He is

offering them the joy that *no man taketh from you* – because it depends on no earthly circumstance whatsoever – but only on God himself.

So before proceeding further we must consider this new relation to God, and how it is accomplished. Besides the sorrows of the disciples, forsaken of Christ, we must consider the sorrow of forsakenness that Christ endured on the cross – the unimaginable anguish expressed in his cry, *My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?* Christ stands between a world that has forsaken God – and of the God that must forsake the sin of the world; yet God does not forsake the world, but wills its salvation, its reconciliation to himself; and so he sends Christ to stand between God and the world as Mediator – and to take upon himself entire responsibility for the world's sin. In entire obedience, without withdrawing himself in the least from his allegiance to the Father, the Son does so. He endures the unimaginable sorrow of being forsaken by God, that we might come to know the unimaginable joy of everlasting fellowship with him. He is separated from the Father he loves, that we who trust in him should never be separated from the Father's love for us.

In his being forsaken, is the new relation to God accomplished *for us*; and in the forsakenness of the disciples is this new relation that is realized *in us*. For his disciples, the cross is indeed a shattering moment, in which all that they knew, or thought they knew, fell to pieces: their understanding of God's purpose, their expectation of an earthly kingdom, their reliance upon their own good intentions, all the wisdom of the world within which their embryonic faith was constricted and imprisoned. Only when those bonds are shattered, in the sorrows of the cross, is their faith set free to embrace a hope greater than the world, a hope of resurrection. Only when they see him no more, can they see him again, in the newly purified spiritual vision, of faith which dares to believe what it has not yet seen. For the sorrow of the cross "is not the dumb pain of mourning: it is the pain of struggle and transformation, the breaking of the preparatory state of our old nature, which involves our old attitudes and expectations. It is the birth pangs of new life in the spirit^a, the new life of faith, which dares to believe what it has not yet seen"^b The joy of Easter is the joy of this faith, which sees beyond the grave, and that joy *no man taketh from you*.

The pain of that new birth, this passing over from sorrow to joy, is the very meaning of our life as Christians in the world. In this world, as St. Peter says in today's epistle, we are *strangers and pilgrims*, this is not our homeland. As such we are not without suffering and sorrow, bewilderment, perplexity, as this new life takes form in us - as old attitudes, expectations die, and new ones are born. In the providence of God, even our own frustrations and disappointments, the disruptions and demoralizations of this epidemic, are the means by which God may wean us from worldly passions, and fit us for life with himself. In his providence these sorrows are not are not loss but gain - for there is no new life without the pangs of travail, no new spiritual life without this sorrow. Even amid our sorrows, therefore, we have reason to take heart, and in death embrace this new life, which the Lord has won for us, and is bringing to birth in us. May we take heart! May we embrace it! Amen, Amen.

St. John 16

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Then said some of his disciples among themselves, What is this that he saith unto us, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me: and, Because I go to the Father?

¹⁸ They said therefore, What is this that he saith, A little while? we cannot tell what he saith. ¹⁹ Now Jesus knew that they were desirous to ask him, and said unto them, Do ye enquire among yourselves of that I said, A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me? ²⁰ Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy. ²¹ A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world. ²² And ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.

^a Thus the pain the disciples will experience in the loss of Christ, is the pain of new birth, of new spiritual life being brought to birth in them – spiritual regeneration - by which they have remission of sins, a new relation with God Cf. Order of Baptism: “Almighty and immortal God ... the life of those who believe, and the resurrectin of the dead: we call upon thee for this child, that he, coming to thy holy Baptims, may receive remission fo sins by spiritual regeneration....”

^b R D. Crouse, Sermon for Easter III