

Jubilate, the Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2009

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✠ Jesu juva ✠

OUR LITTLE WHILE

Lamentations 3:22-33; I Peter 2:11-20; John 16:16-22

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Desus said to His disciples, “A little while and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father.” Now, this saying made them a little uneasy. And they said to one another “What is this He says...” It did not sound good. Where was He going? Why wouldn’t they be with Him? How long would He be gone from them? What would they do without Him in the meantime? What would become of Him, or of them? And when Jesus explains His meaning to them, I’m not so sure it gave them a great deal of comfort. For He speaks to them of sorrow and of lamentation. But afterward, He promises, they will have joy. Of course, it’s that first part that is troublesome. No one likes to a prophetic word telling them that they are going to suffer and be sorrowful. How bad will it be? How long will it last? When will we get past this first part and get on to the joy? Though the text is silent on this, I’m sure they wondered all of these things or something similar to them.

Well, they wouldn’t have to wait long to begin the sorrowing and lamenting; for that very night Jesus was betrayed by Judas and taken away from them to be crucified. And they wept and mourned and were afraid for their own lives as well. But Christ broke the bonds of the grave and rose again, appearing to them that very day and saying “Peace to you”. Where before for a little while they had endured immense sorrow, now their sorrow was turned to joy. Their friend, rabbi, and Savior, whom they loved had been taken away from them, and now had come back alive.

But He would not remain among them like this forever, but only for forty days. Then He returned to His Father in Heaven to take up His seat on the Heavenly throne. And now while they awaited His return there would be another little while for them. And while this second little while was endured with the surety and confidence that came with Jesus resurrection from the dead, it was still a little while of hardship, of struggle for them, of lamenting at times, of sorrowing at times, of suffering at times, of persecution, and eventually of martyrdom for all but one of them. And yet they were enabled to endure these things faithfully, knowing that Christ Jesus who had risen from the dead had ascended to prepare a place for them and would bring them to the fullness of the joy they had begun to experience in His resurrection.

Christianity, you see, is not a religion of instant gratification. If it were it would not be called faith, but something else, a system perhaps, or an experience. And there are many out there who have sought to turn faith into a system or experience where instant gratification is promised and supposedly achieved. You've all heard the promises of success and wellness given by preachers and authors who claim that if you just follow their brand of Christian spirituality you will experience extraordinary blessings now in this life and relatively quickly too! And it is not only those who promise worldly success, but those who promise spiritual success too. And they delude many into thinking that being a Christian brings instant results. But Christ does not make these kinds of promises to His disciples. In fact He pretty much says just the opposite. "Most assuredly I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice."

People naturally think, "If God loves me, if I'm His child, then why do I have it so hard when I see other people, people who are not Christians, or who are not faithful, enjoying wealth and success and all of the good things of life?" It seems backwards. And in a certain sense it is. The world is backwards because the world rejects God's love and grace in Christ. And yet the unbelievers in this world seem to thrive at times. And it is frankly confusing to the faithful when you observe this.

Moreover, they do it apparently without much guilt and without the internal struggle the Christian must endure. For you have a war going on internally. You have been called to live a life of holiness and of faith, but your flesh wants desperately what the world has. It wants to sin because through sin it can get the instant gratification it craves. This is why Peter says: "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul..." And yet we know the end of such lusts, for if they war against the soul, that means they seek to harm it, to bring you into destruction.

The sense of this is captured in Psalm 73 where Asaph laments: "I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men... Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than heart could wish... They speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue walks through the earth... And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches." And what is Asaph's initial reaction to these observations. He thinks to himself: "Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, And washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, And chastened every morning." He thinks: "This is not right. I am God's child, so why do I suffer while they prosper? Why must I battle when they can just enjoy. But then he comes to understanding: "When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end." Their end, of course, is destruction and judgment from God. And Asaph says of all this: "Surely You set them in slippery places..." Their

very wealth and riches become for them a slippery place in that they help them continue in their downward path. Hardship might cause them to reconsider and repent. But ease and wealth do nothing to turn them from the path of destruction.

Solomon explains today that the suffering Christians endure in this life are sent by God and used by Him to refine us. He says: "The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." And then he continues in a seemingly incongruent way: "It is good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone and keep silent, because God has laid it on him; let him put his mouth in the dust — there may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes him, and be full of reproach. For the Lord will not cast off forever. Though He causes grief, yet He will show compassion according to the multitude of His mercies." But this way that seems so backwards, is actually the way of the Lord.

Christ Himself endured immense suffering and finally even crucifixion before entering into the joy of His resurrection and victory. As we chanted just a few minutes ago: "It was necessary for Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead and to enter into His glory." Christians too are called to bear their crosses after His pattern. This is why Peter says a little later in his first epistle (5:10): "But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you."

And in the midst of the soul's battle, in the midst of Christian suffering, Christ bestows His mercy and strength, giving you even now a foretaste of the joy that will be yours in heaven. Solomon said today: "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness." Every morning that you have ever experienced from the beginning of life until now, is a gift from God. You have no right to live, after all. According to your sins you ought to die. You should be made to lie down on your bed at night and never rise again. But then the morning comes and God has not struck you down in your sleep. You live another day by His providential grace. And this, according to Solomon, is a picture of His faithfulness. He does not consume you, but gives you His mercy. And you can say with Him: "The Lord is my portion, says My soul, therefore I hope in Him!" But it is not only in His providence that we learn of God's love and care for us, but in His saving grace given us through the Gospel. When you have the Word preached to you, Christ is speaking grace into your ear and into your soul. When you receive absolution. The failings of your flesh and the shame and guilt they brought are removed from you and you are declared righteous by God Himself through the pastor's office. And when you eat and drink the blessed meal of Holy Communion, you get a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in which you will dine with Christ and all His saints in heaven. You do not, of course, experience the full joy of these now, but by faith you receive them, believing what Christ has said; that through these you have forgiveness, life and salvation.

And then one day, whether it be by death or by Christ's return, the little while of suffering in this world will pass. And you will at last experience the long-promised joys of heaven; that is, of life with Christ. The riches and ease of this world will dissolve away into the chaos and destruction of Hell. And then what has seemed backward for so long will either be rectified or shown to have been right all along. For though "you now have sorrow... [Christ Jesus] will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you."

This is one of the great gifts of the Christian life: you know your end. You know that this world's way of life is leading to destruction. You know that everything the flesh values so highly is passing away. And you know that whatever suffering you must now endure whether from the will of your flesh or from the hatred of the world, it will come to an end one day. And you know that in Christ, you have only the joys of heaven to look forward to in the end. And this knowledge is freeing. People often opine that if they knew when they would die they would have greater freedom to live now, for they would have no fear. You know your end already! What now do you have to fear? Now you are free to live your life fully and faithfully. Whether the world loves you or hates you, whether Satan assails you or leaves alone. Whether you have wealth or poverty. Whether you live or die, you are Christ's. And so long as you are in Him, these things cannot harm you. For His compassions fail not, as Solomon has said.

By this knowledge and faith, the apostles were freed to live their lives in service to Christ, to spread the Gospel throughout the world and in the end to face death confidently, knowing that they would soon be with Christ and have joy again. By this knowledge the martyrs of old faced their persecutors. By this knowledge they continue to do so today. And by this knowledge you too can live and die in confidence, unafraid of what may happen here, knowing that you are a pilgrim, as Peter says, and that your joy is found where your true home is, where Christ is, who sits at the right hand of the Father and prepares a place for us. Thanks be to Him for the joy of His resurrection and for the promised joys of heaven; who has promised us that this little while of sorrow and struggle too will pass; to whom belongs all glory and honor, now and forever. Amen

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠