

Easter 3, 2021, The Principal

JESUS said to his disciples, 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.

These words of Jesus come from part of his speech to his disciples on the night of the last supper. For the next three weeks, our Gospel readings come from chapter 16 of St John's Gospel. They are precious words, being the last words of the disciples to a master and friend before he departs to suffer for them and for us, before he returns to them and to us in the resurrection itself. We hear these words in this weeks after Easter because they teach us not only about Christ's death and resurrection, but they teach us how we share in the resurrection of Christ. ***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.***

If we were fully mature in love, it would be enough for us that these words are the address of our Beloved, our Friend, our Lord, to us and to his Church. But since we are not fully mature in love, it may matter more to us that these words matter more directly to us—they give us a picture of how the Risen life of Christ overflows in us, how the life which conquers all forms of death, the love which conquers all that diminishes or mars human life, and overflows in each one of us. And it will matter to us that our Lord speaks to his disciples who gather in confusion and perplexity. What is this going away, what is this coming again? Even we to whom the resurrection has been displayed, who have support of centuries of believers, still receive this great gift and mystery in some measure in confusion and perplexity. How do we make sense of it: is this resurrection real, is it real for us, and does it matter in our lives? Our Lord speaks not just to a gathered band of disciples, by a Holy Spirit poured out on us, on His Church. His words are living words. He addresses us, he shows us what risen life looks like, and he invites us to see, again and again, how travail and sorrow is transformed to become the joy of the new birth.

JESUS said to his disciples, 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.

The first "*A little while*", when the disciples will not see their Lord, is the time of His death and resurrection. He is going away to offer Himself on the wood of the cross, but He will rise again on the third day, Alleluia.

The second "little while" points to the return of the Son to the Father on the Day of the Ascension. "***Again a little while, and you will see me, because I go to the Father.***" During this second "little while", during the 40 days between His Resurrection and Ascension, our Lord prepares his disciples to see him and know him in different way, with the eye of faith. He is going away, but He sends the Holy Sprit, who makes Him present even when He is absent, Alleluia

There is a 3rd "little while" expressed in Jesus' words. God's time is not our time. God sees all time at once: past, present, and future. From divine perspective, and the perspective of faith, the time between Jesus going away at the Ascension and his 'coming again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead' is but "a little while."

This 3rd little way, shapes a 4th, a 4th which is the time in which we live, and which we live in between all these diff little whiles:

We aren't just waiting for some future appearance of our Lord. He is present now, his history is present to us; the present is broken open to and eternal in Him.

We live in time of all these “little whiles”, we find ourselves with the disciples. The Christian life, now, is like so many departings and returnings of the risen Lord. We live in all these ‘little whiles’ between our Lord’s going away and returning.

At times, we seem to live between Good Friday and Easter. God may appear to depart from us. The one who trusted and who was there for us so vividly that we could almost feel His presence seems to be lost to us, laid in the grave and dead.

At other times, we find ourselves with the disciples between Easter and Ascension. We seem to catch glimpses of our Lord, appearing and disappearing, we know not how. Like the disciples on the Emmaus road, we ask Him to stay with us, abide with us, because night is drawing near. At the point of greatest clarity, recognition, and promise, our Lord seems to depart.

Living in these little whiles shapes the experience of travail, of sorrow, which Christ teaches his disciples then and now to expect:

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.

Now, how we live in these little whiles is shaped by what we see and don’t see. Seven times in the short passage, Our Blessed Lord refers to seeing him or not seeing him—
Seeing is key to Easter life

Pusey described this in broad terms in his Lectures on Types. Pusey wanted us to be able to see, for example, in the patriarch Joseph, who reveals himself to his brothers, a kind of revelation of Christ before time and after now, then and now. Our Lord who we encounter is the hidden saviour of his brothers, both the people of Israel and the Gentiles. Pusey speaks about the kind of seeing which will enable us to recognize the light of the resurrection not just in our lives, but also manifest in all things:

The natural world is an emblem of the spiritual. We see further with diminished light: noon-day beams contract our sphere of vision, although they heighten the intensity of the objects close at hand to us. God and His ways and His Nature we can, of course, know but in part; and our highest knowledge must be our indistinctest; [our highest knowledge must be our indistinctest] for that which is most elevated must most surpass our comprehension;¹ it belongs to another sphere, and just touches, as it were, upon that wherein we dwell;² [see God in his ways in these glimpses, like disciples who see risen Lord coming and going]³

Pusey describes in broad terms how we experience these little whiles, in terms of epistemology – how we see world, how we grasp the relationship of natural to the supernatural or sacramental life.

¹ Marshall, 5: “But with our imperfect faculties, however clear our view may be, we can know God, only in part.”

² its centre is not in this world, and so we cannot surely it encompass; its very proportions we can discern only here and there as we see ‘parts of His ways’ bearing one upon another; as a whole we see nothing, can judge of nothing; because we are not at the centre whence it can be seen; our most spiritual faculties are just allied to it, for we are in the flesh.

³ [They were content with nothing but the mid-day Sun and so lost all sympathy for the refreshing hues of its rising or setting light, or those glimpses into a far distant land, which indistinct, though they may be, open a wider range of vision.]

Because we are of God and born of God, we have some sense for beholding the things of God; but because we are in the flesh, and ‘no man can see God and live,’ the light but parts from between the clouds lest we should be struck down to the earth and blinded. Whatever then we gain in distinctness and precision we lose in depth; our furthest point of vision is just where ‘light and darkness part....

The Song of Songs gives us more personal terms for this experience.

Song of Solomon 2.9 ff

My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the lattice. My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come ... Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

The bridegroom is described like a hart, a deer, who stands behind the wall or the garden. He looks through the windows and through the lattice-work, but his presence is only fleeting. This speaks to us of the Risen Lord who comes and goes among His disciples, not just then, but now.⁴ These are the times when God appears far from us, or when trying to live the Christian life seems impossible, or we feel that we are just going through the motions.

Seeing through lattice, longing for he who is unknow, we are spouse, sick with love.

Our Epistle teaches us how our vision is shaped. It gives us practical instructions for how to see and recognize risen Christ, in us, among us, in the world.

⁵⁶DEARLY beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.⁷

What are fleshly lusts: St Paul gives us a good list, which I'll share with you – it can offend or challenge each of us, and also promise same fullness of embrace of divine mercy:

⁹ Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, ²¹ envy, ^[b] drunkenness, carousing, and the like.⁸

This list of fleshly sins includes not only sins of the body but all the spiritual sins which oppose our true life, which is the life of the Spirit in us.⁹

⁴ In another part of the song, the Bride searches desperately through the city for her Beloved who appears to be lost to her: "I will seek him whom my soul loveth." These periods of absence picture the "little whiles" of our Lord's absence.

⁵ The Epistles for the last two weeks have described this in more practical ways. Last week, the epistle described how life of Christ is formed in us by a kind of sharing in his suffering. This week, the sorrow in which we share is also a kind of suffering, but a suffering which we are invited to choose for ourselves:

⁶ bits of the next two paragraphs refer to C. E. B. Cranfield, *I & II Peter and Jude: Torch Bible Commentaries*, SCM Press, 1960, 69- 70

⁷ Fleshly lusts are not simply hot-bloodied passions. Fleshly lusts are the desires of the flesh, human nature in its fallen state, alienated from God.

⁸ (Gal. 5.19-22).

⁹ Hatred and jealousy, anger and envy, all forms of running after false gods, as well as impurity, fornication, and licentiousness, are included in the NT lists of fleshly sins.

Despite the Gnosticism or dualism of our contemporary world which often exalts the body by splitting apart the body and the spirit, the fleshly and the spiritual, this is not the logic of the Incarnation. The Inc unites the human and divine, external and internal, passing and eternal. In telling us to abstain from fleshly lusts, St Peter is telling us not to live in externals, on the surface of things, in a world of power and pleasure which we don't know what we are meant for or what the world is meant for, because we don't see ourselves in relations to the life which is hid with Christ in God. St Peter is, of course, an early advocate of genuine mindfulness.

If we take all this seriously, it can be a bit depressing. Can we see Christ if it depends on us? That doesn't sound like a message of salvation, a way out, the fullness of life, it sounds like an impossible weight.

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, not just for himself, but in us. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

The Risen life is a gift, we live in this life, the Son who comes to dwell in our hearts is the Risen and Ascended Lord – his overflowing life is our life

At the same time, we are not just robots. We're not the kind of creatures who can just be stamped and sent away changed – we are invited to embrace, take up, and fight for what we have been given.

If you want to see Jesus, then abstain from fleshly lusts- fight against sin in all its forms.

This is a world of clever people, very clever, but it's possible to be clever, and not very wise. We need to fight for what has been given.¹⁰

Sometimes, we live in the little while between the resurrection and ascension: we have a kind of calm confidence – we know what the right path is, we seek the grace to choose it, and we can even, sometimes, count the suffering thankworthy. The element of uncertainty or lack of proof does not confuse us.

At other times, trying to do the right thing just feels like death. The world does not give us any markers or any assurances, or even tells us that real freedom is to embrace fleshly lusts of greed, envy, or license. God appears to have abandoned us, or trying to be a Christian seems strange, impossible, or even stupid.¹¹

¹⁰ St Peter's description of the Christians to whom he writes as "strangers and pilgrims" is helpful here. He helps us to see what it means not to have a sacramental vision, a spiritual apprehension both of Christ and the spiritual realities of His kingdom.

To say that we are strangers and pilgrims on earth is to say that the world is not an end in itself, it is not sufficient just to look on the external character of things as if governed by blind laws, rather of market, or natural forces, some other lifeless mechanism. Rather, we cannot see the world clearly without that spiritual apprehension by which we recognize the presence of Christ coming and going among us and by which we see all things in relation to their origin and destiny.

On the other hand, this emphasis on spiritual apprehension does not deny the reality of the world or the importance of how we live in it and with one another.

By living as citizens of heaven we become truly useful of citizens of earth. St Peter tells us about the kind of obedience and freedom which are necessary to build the bonds of community. This means that living as citizens of heaven isn't a way of escape, but a way that we communicate a heavenly character to the earthly city. Or, we cannot serve the world, our communities, which we can see unless we have sacramental vision which enable us to see this world in relation to the eternal realities which govern both it and us.

With St Peter's descriptions of the obedience which is due to government, we can easily see how we could move on to think about the decisions which face us in the run up to the election next week. Or, we could ask about the kind of engagement which is required from us in the face of the different kinds of crises which have been before us, the plight of refugees in rickety boats, and the plight of Christian communities slaughtered by fanatics. But instead, I would like us to take another step back, or probe deeper. How is the character and vision which will guide our practical decisions and actions formed?

Living as strangers and pilgrims is another way of living in the little while of Christ's coming and going. This life is a kind of trial, where sorrow turns to joy.

Think about the experience of trying to do the right thing, or in Easter terms, of seeking those things which are above: Trying to forgive someone who has hurt us, choosing to be truthful when a little dishonesty might be to our advantage, deciding to have less – as in individual or a group – so that others to whom we are bound can have enough – just not giving up when we know that we are called to press on.

¹¹ At those times, counting all this thankworthy, as St Peter called us to do last week, seems more like a bad joke than a mystery of faith. – try be faithful, abstain from fleshly lusts, seek to love, real acts of service – live in a new reality
O Lord Christ, Help us to trust thee, when we see thee not, and our way is shadowed by sorrow or doubt; and in thy great

Christ's words today teach us to expect this struggle. We learn to expect that the "little whiles" of the joy of his presence mingle with the sense of his being far away. The struggle is not the sign of a weak faith, it is rather like the pains of labour by which the life of Christ is formed in us. We are also invited to see that the struggle we have to live as Christians is not just a struggle to do the right thing, it is a searching for Christ, a search for our risen Lord who is already searching for us. In seeking those things which are above, we discover that we find ourselves and the world also, not a shadow, but the real thing. 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.