

John 16:5-15
Pusey House (Online)
Wednesday, May 13th
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Since the weather has become somewhat warmer here in St. Petersburg, I've been able to go out on runs, which is an admittedly mundane—if not melancholy—start to a sermon. But for lockdown life it's a significant step. Hopefully, I can bring it up without provoking envy, if what I read in the press is true about the UK gently easing its restrictions.

Now I can jog to a nearby park which may remain open simply because it's too large to fence shut. And on my way, I pass a small turquoise church with its golden onion domes and trim yard. And though it's locked up, on late afternoons a recording of a choir chanting the evening service pipes from it into the surrounding streets. That usually comes as a surprise. Like many in this lockdown, I lost track of time long ago. And the tinned Slavonic voices are too unfamiliar to guide my own prayer. But whether or not the music is playing as I huff by, I've come to regard the church like a lovely music box, its internal workings unknown, but its exterior preciously decorated like the shadow of something from the workshop of Carl Fabregé. Whether my delight in it is as a trifle or something spiritual, I cannot say, but it is enough to remind me of my alienation from patterns of worship which usually undergird my life and of what a loud multi-ring circus the current crisis seems.

Everything's topsy-turvy! I call friends and find that one's mother-in-law, whom I met at his wedding and remember as the sort of lady who might produce rock crystals and ask everyone to join her in some sort of healing exercise, had purchased a shotgun! Or in the news I read of apparent "preppers," who in the very moment of their manifest vindication are protesting against the lockdown, for which they alone prepared. Or I see a reliably leftist colleague, objecting to "accepting money from Trump," ostentatiously give away the American government's redistributive stimulus check to the first taker on the Facebook. In that particularly wild ring of this circus, (Facebook's newsfeed, I mean) so many clergy colleagues appear like clowns endlessly unfolding from a tiny car to offer myriad video reflections and rites... and God bless their efforts, but the glut of interpretation and fanfare overwhelms me and provokes the desire to snap shut my laptop, as one might restore the lid to a jack-in-the-box.

Given that swirling confusion—the seeming unreality of our present circumstances—I’m grateful Pusey House’s use of the Discord app carves out a sense of separate space, space simple and quiet enough that we might hear Christ’s words to us clearly, as he warns his disciples of coming trials: “Now I go my way to him that sent me” (John 16:5). And I don’t know about you, but I hear them today and really feel the sorrow of the moment in my heart, of his declaration then and in this crisis now.

Our present situation feels like a cataclysmic Old Testament break, like exile or the deprivation of worship in the Temple; as if we’re locked out of the usual interior spaces of our faith. For this reason, I’m resistant to analogizing our present predicament to events on the liturgical calendar. Indeed, within the chronology of John’s Gospel this story puts us back before Christ’s crucifixion, though “the going away” is thought to refer to his ascension [yet to come in liturgical time].

What might the scriptures tell us about what happens when we feel as if Jesus has gone away for a time? Between the Ascension and Pentecost, Acts only tells us of Matthias’ appointment and nothing more. But I don’t think that really matters. Whether at the Ascension or on Calvary, Jesus appears to have had a lesson for his disciples in leaving them—a departure which he undertook out of love for them—a lesson interwoven with how he describes the work of the coming comforter: letting them behold who they are without him.

Certainly the promise of a coming *comforter* has resonance today, yet Jesus tells the disciples what they are to receive will shake up things as they were: a spirit which convicts not merely of sin, but convicts the world’s righteousness: exposing the inadequacy of our materially-focused world and its works through contrast with the fruits of faithful disciples who believe in One [as yet] unseen ...and promises judgement for the ruler of the world as they had known it [the world as we have known it too].

Speaking only for myself—wary of the dangers of preachers mistaking the pulpit for the confessional—in this time, I’ve wanted to switch on a recording of Lassus’ “Tears of St. Peter” and despair a little. In this season of separation (dare I say captivity?) I relate to Peter’s bitter weeping, because of pragmatic choices that come at the expense of aspirations to greater holiness, because of the shallowness of my overwhelming hope for things simply to return to the way they were before, and the unpleasant confrontation with my own indolence, absent any excuses. If the comforter consoles by convicting, it would appear my life, even in quarantine, is post-Pentecost.

Perhaps it is easier to number myself among those of the world than with the disciples in their belief because doing so allows me to indulge in the narcissism of self-improvement in the present crisis. My conception of the self seems far more immediate than the spiritual labor this global lockdown invites. In his *Moralia on Job*, Gregory the Great wrote of the passage we hear tonight, “It is as if [Jesus] said in plain words, if I do not withdraw my body from your eyes, I cannot lead you to understanding of the unseen through the comforting Spirit” (18:447). In other words, the Spirit by the difficulty of his invisibility points us onward to follow Christ to our Father.

In the present moment, the world’s desire for a return to normalcy mirrors that sin most seductive for churchgoers, of mistaking return to the past for return to the Father. For as visible as those perverse, recollected paradises [of more pure faith, of greater influence for the church] may be in our deceitful imaginations or in our slippery faculties of memory, they are not what we are promised through belief in Christ, indeed they pale in comparison.

The idea is abrupt. It challenges our confidence in the usual simplifications of Christ vs. culture [whether culture’s woes be construed as licentiousness or capital] and reveals the opposition to be far greater. The Spirit draws us onward into the truth, as a comforter who shines light on what we’d prefer to leave done in the dark, a consoler who measures the insufficiency of our righteousness and as One who reigns omnipotent yet underscores without any obfuscation that so long as we are in the world, we remain revolutionaries whose time will never come until the trumpet blasts on the last day. What comfort can this be? Because of Christ’s incarnation, because of his dying for us, all truth, even the new things the Spirit has to teach us ...things which convict rather than affirm and thereby glorify the Son’s merciful self-giving... these truths open possibilities otherwise far beyond our ken.

If this sounds frustratingly abstract, permit me to grasp for a more concrete example. Being an Anglican in Russia, for me Easter has come twice this year. The second time, I watched the broadcast of the lengthy and impressive midnight service presided over by the Patriarch of Moscow from the stunningly rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Observing the intricate chorography through the smoke, I kept thinking of the thinness of the continuity of ritual detail and more especially of place. Perhaps since those are things we’ve really lost in this crisis. Have you ever seen video of the Cathedral’s destruction in 1931, when after two explosions it collapsed into clouds of dust? The image persisted in my mind.

As the celebration of the sacred mysteries unfolded, relayed by cameras nestled in the structure's heights, it was as if I was watching not as one crowded amid the throng seeking *something* from our Lord, but as if I were seeing from the perspective of the reconstituted building itself. From that vantage point, the juxtaposition of indominable ancient faith re-emerging from the ashes of a bonfire of lives sacrificed to a human-sized dream of satisfaction and justice, pointed yet more insistently to the brittleness of mere material hopes. There undisguised amid the incense and robes, the mystery—the presence of spiritual truth—intruded with its promise of *a mystical materiality to come*, there to be sensed, if remaining un-comprehended.

May we, even now, long for it, order our lives in anticipation of it, and pray:
“Spirit show us who we are today... turn our hearts from our present isolation to the contemplation of what's to come... and focus our minds on the delights of heavenly society with you.”