

BCP Collect: *O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto thy people, that they may love the things which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart. Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away.

Easter is the paradigmatic season of joy, a season of new life and happy hymns. Even with the pressures of examinations or submission deadlines, the natural world cooperates to amplify this message: the longer days with more sun, the flowers in bloom, the lift in our spirits, all help us to apprehend more of the springtime of souls, the springtime of the Church. But, Easter is also a season of anxiety. The first disciples did not greet the discovery of the empty tomb with joy. They were confused and puzzled.¹ In the Gospel for today, Christ prepares his disciples to face this confusion: ***But because I have said these things unto you, sorrow hath filled your heart.*** The disciples are full of sorrow because everything they hoped for seems to be slipping away. Their leader, consoler, friend, master, tells them that he will be betrayed, that he will go away from them. Of course they are sad and anxious. We hear this passage now, because this experience of confusion is still part of our experience, part of the life of the Easter life being shaped in us. The day of Ascension which is the next destination of the Easter journey is the ‘the crown of the festivals’ the reunion of creation and creator, history and eternity.² And yet, with the disciples, the Ascension may seem like another kind of abandonment, a going away that only emphasizes that we already struggle in the midst of the season of joy with a sense of having been left alone.³

This struggle makes the promise of this passage all the more extraordinary: *Nevertheless*, says the Lord Jesus, ***I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away.*** How could it be expedient, a good thing? If He had said -- I am going away, but all is not lost, you will still have a sense of my presence, it may not be as good as it was, but it will be precious all the same — that would be easier to understand. But He does not say this: It is expedient for you: it is the better thing, the best thing. And we read this passage now, because it is not just the best thing for the disciples, but for us. We might think that if we could only enjoy the personal presence of Christ, we would be so much better off, He could answer our questions, give us clear directions, and just being here would be enough. If we think that, we do not understand, our eyes are still closed: we do enjoy the personal presence of Christ, personal is to the same as physical or material. God is Spirit, and we know God most intimately we know him through the life of the Spirit.

¹ One of the most popular self-help books of the 1980s began with the simple phrase ‘Life is difficult’. The honesty of this beginning was part of the charm of the book. We need to be honest about the anxiety and confusion that is part of Easter.

² Augustine

³ The way in which this confusion or anxiety is part of the Easter experience for us is made clear by the choice of the Gospel passages for the three Sundays leading up to the Ascension. They all come from the farewell discourses of Christ, speaking to his disciples on the night he would be betrayed, from John 16. They are puzzled and confused: ‘what is this little while’ when their friend and Master will go away, and then return, and then go away again?

“But you were more inward than my own inwardness,”⁴ writes St Augustine in the *Confessions*. The contemporary theologian Denys Turner describes this paradox:

“God is not to be sought outside the self, for [by the Spirit] God is already there ‘within’, eternally more intimate to me than I am to myself. It is I who am ‘outside’ myself [-outside in seeking the approval of other people, outside when I seek satisfaction in pleasures which point to what they cannot give] is I who am ‘outside’ myself and it is the God within who initiates, motivates and guides the seeking whereby and in which God is to be found. Not only is God within my interiority; it is from the God within that the power comes which draws me back into myself, and so to God.”⁵

It is expedient for Christ to go away, but only so that he can come nearer, so that we may enjoy that personal presence in a way that is more profound and real even than if we were one of those at dinner on the night when he was betrayed. This is the gift of the Spirit.

It is sometimes said that the doctrine of the Trinity is a kind of abstract speculation.⁶ It is more true to say that the doctrine of the Trinity describes the experience that ‘All the comings and goings of our lives find their place and their meaning in the comings and goings of the Son to the Father through the Holy Spirit’.⁷

The disciples struggle to believe what our Lord tells them, and this struggles is ours also. What enables them to apprehend this promise, to rejoice in it? The shortest answer is that it is the gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the promise that waits for us on the other side of the Ascension. But the Holy Spirit does not simply replace our personality, rather something more wonderful is accomplished, the work of the Holy Spirit is the transformation for which we pray in the Collect for today. We evoke ‘ALMIGHTY God’ ‘who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men’. What does Almighty God do: ‘Grant unto thy people, that they may love the things which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise’. This is God’s almightiness, not to erase us, but to perfect and transform us. It’s not simply that we get new information, rather, what we love, and how we love, is changed and transformed. This is both disorienting and painful. It’s important to know this: if we don’t expect the Easter life to be a kind of labour, a struggle, we may simply give up on the struggle. The service of Holy Communion begins with an invitation to enter into this struggle, we pray for the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts. We pray both that we may perfectly love God, and give expression to that love, to magnify it, in our lives. Echoing the words of our preacher last week, let me tell you that this is a dangerous prayer. The whole liturgy, the movement of the Mass, is a Spirit-inspired expression of this work of transformation.

⁴ *Confessions* 3.6.11

⁵ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, p. 59, from the blog of Mary Holste, Holy Virgin Russian Orthodox Church, Menlo Park, CA

‘There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then he must be dug out again’. Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), August 25, 1941 (two years before she died in Auschwitz)

⁶ That is to look at the doctrine from the outside, or as a kind of 2 dimensional fact.

for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.

The comforter is the translation of the Greek word Παράκλητος, a word supercharged with meaning. It has the meaning of one who strengthens and consoles, and also the meaning of advocate, one who pleads or argues on our behalf. In chap 14, our Lord says that this Comforter, the Paraclete, the Counsellor, is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father sends in His name. The Holy Spirit is not a power, a force, but a person, with intelligence and will: ***He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall show it unto you.***

⁷ David Curry, sermon for Easter 4 (2015?)

This transformation means that the coming of the Holy Spirit is not just comfort and consolation, it is also a shaking up. We embrace this transformation in a practical way in the words of the confession. The Spirit reproves or convicts the world of sin, *because*, says Christ, *they believe not on me*. We confess that all our sins are a kind of atheism. The spirit reproves or convicts the world of *righteousness, because*, says the Lord, *I go to my Father*. The Ascension is an affirmation that Christ is indeed Ruler and Judge, but it all expresses the inner movement of this righteousness, a movement πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν (John 1.1), the inner dynamic of Trinitarian love, and the all-embracing movement of the Son into the world and back toward the Father: ‘The whole life of the Son, eternally and incarnate, we might say, is towards the Father. By virtue of his death and resurrection, we are being drawn into the motions of that perfect love.’⁸ When we turn in the opposite direction, we confess that we experience and know the love which draws us as a kind of wrath, alienation. The words of the confession are full of promise precisely because they are so challenging – in saying them we are not condemned, but rather we enter again into that movement of the Son toward the Father, the motion of a perfect love, that we may love those things which he commands, not as an external imposition, but as the very desire of our hearts. The Holy Spirit does not impose a transformation on us, we pray for it, and we are shown in a very practical way what this transformation means for us.

Our Lord gives the Spirit another name which speaks to us of how this transformation is accomplished. The Paraclete is the Spirit of Truth: *when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth*. The Spirit makes it possible to grasp and to know the kind of truth which we cannot simply summon before our mind and possess or control. It is by the Spirit speaking and acting within us that we grasp and embrace the truth which is offered in the words which our Lord spoke, or in reading there the words which point to him: *I know that my Redeemer Liveth*.

This truth is not a proposition or an idea, the Truth into which we are led is a person, a reality. When the Word came to dwell among us, he took on a body, when the Word speaks to us today, it is not just in words, but also with a kind of a body. At the prayer of consecration we pray that ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit ... we may be partakers of [Christ’s] most precious body and blood. The Word is engrafted in us, the Word takes possession of us, transforms us, by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit speaks in us in Word, but also in Sacrament. To know things by an inward apprehension, in the Spirit, does not make the physical or material less real but more. In the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,
And daub their natural faces unaware

This is the same kind of seeing that enables us to recognize and feed on Christ in the form of bread and wine consecrated by His Word and Spirit. It is not a bad thing to sit around and eat blackberries, but there is something better. In worship, in awe and solemn wonder, we learn to take off our shoes, to know Christ and all things in Him renewed and transformed, to have both the blackberries and what they promise.

Let us be prepared to live in the struggle which comes with the shaping of the Easter life in us, and let us pray that these two hands of the Father, Word and Spirit, will embrace, break, and transform us.

⁸ David Curry, *ibid*.