

Joy-Making Sorrow (The “Little Whiles” of the Easter Life)

Sermon preached at Pusey House on the Third Sunday of Easter 2015 by the Principal,
the Reverend Dr George D Westhaver

1 S. Peter 2.11, S. John 16. 16

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, Gospel readings come from chapter sixteen of the Gospel of St John. We hear them 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: our Lord addresses us as His disciples gathered still in some measure in perplexity, wondering about the meaning of these ‘great things which have come to pass’. What we hear is an invitation to share in the risen life of Christ which is the Christian life. In particular, today, we see how the travail, the sorrow, which our Lord describes is transformed to become the joy of the new birth.

To make sense of this, I would like to tell you about an old argument, which still takes on many different forms. In 1841, JH Newman published a review of Henry Hart Milman’s *History of Christianity* (1840). Milman, preceded John Keble as professor of Poetry at Oxford – by the way, all aspiring poets there is a vacancy even now to be filled during Trinity term– Milman, who later became Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral, was perhaps best known as an historian. Newman argues that Milman’s attempt to consider the rise of Christianity in terms of ‘political and social history’ inevitably distorts the object of his study. For example, speaking of Abraham as ‘an Emir or a Sheik’ Milman neglects the vocation which makes Abraham distinct and worthy of our interest. More significantly, Newman points to the problems of describing ‘our Lord’ as ‘One who *appeared* to the mass of mankind in His own age as a peasant of Palestine’. While it is possible to emphasize appearances and to describe Christ’s humanity and crucifixion as ‘external facts’ which can be ‘externally seen’, it is not possible to treat in this way ‘our Lord’s divinity and atonement’. Who Christ is and what he accomplishes are not external facts evident to all, who Christ is cannot be summoned up to be analysed and proved.

In opposition to Milman’s ‘external’ approach, Newman proposes a sacramental view of Milman’s subject – ‘The Christian history is “*an outward visible sign of an inward spiritual grace*”’. It is possible to explain the course of things in terms of interconnected laws which appear to govern the social, political, and physical world ‘as if there was nothing beyond it’. But Newman argues that God has not retired from the world. Rather He is acting through, with, and beneath those physical, social, and moral laws. He argues that ‘*All that is seen, – the world, the Bible, the Church, the civil polity, and man himself, – are types... representatives and organs of an unseen world, truer and higher than themselves*’.

‘All that is seen are representatives and organs of an unseen world’

Now, in this argument, Newman is interpreting a key aspect of Gospel stories for Easter and our lessons today. On the first Easter Day, Mary Magdalene made more than one trip to the tomb of Christ. On one of these occasions, she was by herself. She met a man who she took to be the gardener, but when He spoke to her by name she recognized her Lord and friend for whom she was looking. Mary reached out to embrace Christ, but he, who had been willing to have her anoint him before his death, forbid her to do so on this occasion: ***Touch me not; [do not cling to me] for I am not yet ascended to my Father.*** Mary, with the other disciples, had rejoiced in the physical presence of Christ and relied on Him. But now, after his resurrection she is required to do what all disciples of Christ are required to do, to learn to know Him, love Him, and rely on Him according to a spiritual vision and apprehension. She was being asked what we are all asked to do, and what Newman argued in his review of Milman that we need to do, not to simply look on the outward character of things. Rather, To make sense of history, our lives, the world, we need to see them in relation to their origin and end which is God. Developing the kind of sacramental vision which enables us to know and love Christ who is absent in the body is a key part of what it means to live the risen life. In the words of the traditional epistle for Easter Day: ***seek those things which are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.*** This is the message which is filled out and expanded on in the Gospel and Epistle for today.

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.

Let's begin by trying to make sense of all these 'little whiles'. 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 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 Spirit, who makes Him present even when He is absent, Alleluia.

There is still another "little while" expressed in Jesus' words. This is especially important for us, because it helps us to understand how we are part of this story. 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 returning to Judge the earth at the end of all time is but "a little while."

"A little while, and you will not see me; and again a little while, and you will see me.

In this third "little while", we find ourselves with the disciples. The Christian life is like so many departing's 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, that 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.

Our Lord describes here how the life which is his, is shaped in us, how we participate in his dying and rising. Part of this formation is the shaping of the capacity of vision which Newman described, a form of spiritual apprehension closely allied to faith.

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:

¹DEARLY beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.²

Whatever associations fleshly lusts conjure in our minds, they include all the spiritual sins which oppose our true life, which is the life of the Spirit in us. Hatred and jealousy, anger and envy, all forms of running after false gods, as well as impurity, fornication, and licentiousness, are included in the New Testament lists of fleshly sins. (Gal. 5.19-22).

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 Incarnate 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.

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

¹ 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

² Fleshly lusts are not simply hot-blooded passions. Fleshly lusts are the desires of the flesh, human nature in its fallen state, alienated from God.

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, 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 whiles 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.

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. 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.

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.

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 goodness reveal thyself to us again, that our hearts may rejoice, and we may walk henceforth in the light of thy presence; for the glory of thy holy name, and for the good of the world. Through ...