

First Sunday after Easter

April 11, 2010

“Peace Be Unto You”
(John 20:19-13)

It is a short Gospel, the lesson for this Octave of Easter, only five verses, but Wow! So much happens so quickly that it almost sets your head spinning. The disciples are changed from fearful to glad by the appearance of the Lord, and before we are through the passage they are commissioned apostles, endowed with the Holy Spirit, and empowered to forgive or to retain sins. All of this, of course, is testimony to the power of the risen Christ to transform the disciples and to transform us. But let us examine what happened more slowly.

“That same day *at evening*,” the lesson begins. St. John is very sensitive to the emotional significance of the various times of the day. When at the Last Supper after Jesus tells the disciples that one of them will betray him and hands the sop to Judas, who only hours before had made his abominable deal with the Jewish authorities, John writes, “[Judas] then having received the sop went immediately out: *and it was night*” (Jn. 13:40), a dark night indeed. In a similar way John begins this 20th chapter of his Gospel by saying, “The first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, when *it was yet dark*, unto the sepulcher” (Jn. 20:1). It was not only before sunrise that she came to the tomb, but, not knowing that the Lord had risen, it was dark, dark with the same hopeless blackness that surrounded Judas, the darkness that descended upon them all when their Lord was crucified, the light of the world extinguished. Now, John begins his account of the Lord’s appearance to the disciples by writing, “Then that same day *at evening*” (20:19). The sun was setting and the shadows lengthened, and although Peter and John of the eleven had seen the empty tomb and the women had told them the Lord had risen, they couldn’t be sure. Who could believe it? And so they hung between darkness and light, despair and hope, and the hours wore on. It must have been a terrible day, and now as such light as they had seen began to fade, so did their hopes. It was evening, twilight. Peter Chrysologus wrote, “It was evening more by grief than by time. It was evening for minds darkened by the somber cloud of grief and sadness because although the report of the resurrection had given the slight glimmer of twilight, nevertheless the Lord had not yet shone through with his light in all its

brilliance.”¹ We Christians celebrate our Lord’s resurrection early on Easter Day, often at sunrise, with songs of joy and triumph and all stops pulled. That was not the experience of the disciples that first Easter Day. The sun was setting and so were their hopes.

The picture that was only suggested by the reference to the time of day is then filled out by the further description of the setting: “Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews” We needn’t elaborate on the picture. John’s few words say it well, and a moment’s reflection brings to mind the total scene of the three dark days at the end of a week that began on a wholly different note with the disciples thinking they had the world by its tail. But the world had risen up against them and taken away their Lord. The darkness had snuffed out the light. Despair made hope impossible, and fear made them resort to the only security they could find. Go into hiding. Shut the door and throw the locks. It is often suggested that they were in the Upper Room where they had last been with the Lord. That is where they gathered when then returned to Jerusalem after the Lord’s ascension to await the promised coming of the Spirit. It was there they had supped with him. It was there he knelt before them, the towel on his shoulder, the basin in his hand. It is commendable that they did not scatter and that they did not flee Jerusalem altogether. With rumors of the resurrection, they did not know what the authorities would do. They stayed together, not only because the Jews, having smitten the Shepherd, might turn their sights on the sheep, but because of all that had bound them together three past three years, the teaching they heard, the love they saw, the miracles they beheld: water turned to wine, bread and fish made to feed a multitude, Lazarus raised from the dead. They were bound together by common experience and memories unlike any others. “To whom shall we go,” they once said to the Lord, “Thou hast the words of eternal life.” He was gone, but his words held them together still.

Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967), Swiss medical doctor, Christian convert and mystic, close disciple of the eminent Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, wrote a lengthy devotional commentary on the Gospel of John that is full of wonderful insights. She entitled the fourth volume on these last chapters of the Gospel. *The Birth of the Church*, and she rightly saw the disciples huddled here on Easter evening as the Church in embryo. Regrettably,

¹ ACCS, *New Testament IVb: John 11-21*, p. 355.

she falls into the kind of thinking that interpreters who stray too far from the text and context often get into, so that there is little to keep them from making the text mean whatever they might imagine it means. One sees this often fanciful kind of interpretation in the rabbinic commentaries and not infrequently even in some of the Church Fathers. Von Speyr sees in the doors barred against the Jews, the disciples (the Church) as closed off from unbelief. She writes, “The Jews, of whom they are afraid, are everything that stands outside the livingness of their ecclesiastical community. It is not only fear of external attack by unbelief, but it is also fear that something could be obscured by the new, that they might have to accept something alien, that endangering compromises would have to be made.”² For her the locks on the doors represent Church Dogma, which “is the door that is closed against everything non-Christian outside it.”³

I agree that the disciples are the Church in embryo. I think John would have us understand that. But he does not see the situation here as particularly admirable--a realistic picture of the situation of the Church in the world without the assurance of the presence of the risen Christ, but not admirable. The Venerable Bede was right when he wrote, “The weakness of the Apostles is disclosed in this circumstance; gathered together behind closed doors through fear of the Jews.”⁴ John would not commend the disciples for operating on the basis of fear, and he was one of them. It was a condition the Lord would soon change. I tend to see here not a picture of the ideal Church, the Church at its best, but rather a picture of the contemporary state of the Church, disciples clinging together, which is admirable, but in fear, which is not; treasuring memories of the past, which is commendable, but living only in the past and not really coming to terms with the demands of the present or the promise of the future, which is not. The disciples here, including John, had not yet come to the place where John would be, decades later, when he came to write his Gospel, when he had begun to grasp deeply the meaning of the eternal Word of God become flesh, light unconquerable by darkness, life inextinguishable by death. But that would change quickly.

“Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in their midst, and

² *The Birth of the Church: Meditations on John 18-21*, tr. David Kipp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 198-199.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁴ *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, vol. II, tr. & ed. By M.F. Toal (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), p. 266.

saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he showed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord.” First he spoke peace, and then he showed them his hands and feet. He imparted peace to them by showing them his hands and feet. It is all tied together. His true peace that passes understanding is only possible in the knowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh and suffered for our sins, the Lamb of God to taking away the sin of the world, and by showing his real presence in their midst, the same lamb that was slain, he reveals that he is victor over death and hell. The wounds were not to remind them of what had happened. How could they forget? They were to show that the One who was rejected by the world, spat upon and crucified, was alive and in their midst. In the very flesh which he assumed, our flesh which he took on for our sake, he suffered and died. And in our flesh, with hands that had bled when punctured, with a side that was torn open when pierced, he rose again to life. The hands and side bore witness to the resurrection of the body, but they testified also and eloquently to the outpouring of his love. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” The wounds which he shall bear to the end of time bear incontrovertible testimony to his love. The love of God and the sin of the world have clashed, and the victor is risen from the dead. It is for this reason, because he stands before them alive who died for their sins, theirs, and ours, and the world’s, that he shows them his wounds and speaks to them words of peace. The darkness did not overcome and would not and will not. Therefore, fear can be dispelled and the peace of the risen conquering Christ, a peace that nothing can take away, can be bestowed. The peace could not be given without the wounds, nor the wounds be for our healing without the one who bore them being raised from the dead. The love and the peace, the wounds and the words, go together.

And with this peace and with this love, the disciples are glad. Their joy was a fulfillment of that joy of which the Lord spoke in his last discourses, recorded by John in chapters 14 through 17 (e.g. 14:1, 27; 15:11; 16:20-22, 33; 17:13). And it was an anticipation of the gladness of which John foretold toward the end of the Book of the Revelation, where he wrote, “Let us rejoice and be glad and give honor to him, for the marriage of the Lamb is come and his bride has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:8), and where he spoke of the new Jerusalem, where God wipes away all tears, and there shall be no more death neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21:4).

But this is not the end of the story. This is a beginning not an end. Here Von Speyr is right, “It is no peace that puts an end to struggle and movement, but a pure beginning.”⁵ The fearful disciples, now made glad by the risen Christ, are told immediately that they must go into the world, the very world that had rejected the Lord and delivered the wounds, the world against which they had locked the doors. Indeed they are to be a part of the same mission as their Lord. Jesus said to them, “As the Father has sent me, even so send I you.” “Their mission is to continue the Son’s mission,”⁶ the purpose of which is the forgiveness of sins and the redemption of the sinner. The purpose is to make the embryo Church into the complete Church, to bring all God’s sheep into one fold, to make them one as he and the Father are one, to make the Bride ready for the marriage of the Lamb.

The Lord will not allow them to remain behind locked doors, nor will he allow us to do so either. We who are withdrawn from the world must go into the world, for it is the world, threatening as it can be, that God so loves. We are to go forth with a gospel and with the authority that brings about the forgiveness of sins and transforms the sinner, with the truth of the eternal Word of God that can enlighten the world if we hide it not under a bushel. We must and can do so courageously, for the darkness will not comprehend the light, cannot overcome it. The resurrection of Christ, if we truly believe it, will change us from sorrowful to glad, from fearful to brave, from huddling together nervously and self-protectively to boldly venturing forth to continue Christ’s mission, sent by him and dependent upon him as he was sent by the Father and dependent upon the Father. To this end he has imparted to us his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of gladness, the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of power. The Lord is risen and stands in our midst saying, “Peace be unto you.” But the only way to receive that peace is to go forward on his mission—a challenging one, to be sure, one ever fraught with danger and accompanied by opposition, misunderstanding and ridicule. But it was for the sake of that mission that our Lord was made flesh, and that he died and rose again. That very same mission is now ours, if only we will leave our quiet, intimate and secure places and go forth into the world with his truth and love. “As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you” . . . you!

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (xii-xxi)*, (New York: Doublesay & Company, Inc., 1970), p. 1036.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the First Sunday after Easter, April 11, 2010. Copyright © 2010.