

Easter 3

I take as my text today from St. John's Gospel passage:

....ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Here we are in Eastertide, celebrating the Resurrection of our Lord; yet today's Gospel passage from St. John takes us back to an event just before his Crucifixion. Indeed, it is the Last Supper, and we find Jesus engaged in a final discourse with his disciples, a discourse beautifully recorded by St. John.

Though seemingly out of place, our Church Fathers chose these Sundays in Eastertide to be a kind of Advent Season leading up to **Whitsunday** or **Pentecost**, the birthday of the Church.

In this passage from John's Gospel, Jesus has gathered his disciples together to share with them a final meal before his crucifixion.

There, in the Upper Room, supper having come to an end, and Judas Iscariot having left to do his deed, our Lord speaks to them in terms that are seemingly difficult to follow.

They are thinking in the present, while Jesus is thinking in terms that relate to eternity. Even through the centuries, as our Lord's words are read, re-read, and analyzed, there has been much conjecture and confusion as to what they may mean.

Though the Apostles had been with Jesus for the entirety of his ministry; though he had demonstrated most certainly Who he is; the Apostles, indeed, all those who were his Disciples, were fixed on the Jewish expectation of an earthly Messiah, and their religious and cultural background made it ever so difficult for them to fully recognize Jesus as the True Messiah sent from Heaven.

Even today, when presented with the Truth, there are so many who cannot accept it for the world is more and more encroaching on Christianity and the Truth it holds.

But on that last night, Jesus, knowing their thoughts, once again tells them what to expect — the sorrow they would experience, followed by the overwhelming joy that would transform them forever.

Indeed, the joy that welled up within them when Jesus appeared after his Resurrection carried them through all trials and tribulations with their faith unshaken. This joy was the mark of Christians throughout the persecutions, throughout the history of the Church. It is *a joy that no man can take from you*.

The source of their grief, his Death on the Cross, would become the source of their joy, for it would procure for them, for us, for all Christians, peace and pardon in this life and eternal joy in the world to come.

But on the night of the Last Supper, at that moment as Jesus is addressing his Apostles, the die had been cast, and soon his words would become reality.

The years of preparation for this moment were coming to a close. The betrayal was at hand. The time of testing for the Apostles had arrived.

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.

Perhaps, because they were so accustomed to a material world, the Apostles had not grasped the fuller meaning of our Lord's words, the subtle change in the words he used for *see*.

In the first reference *A little while, and ye shall not see me...*, Jesus uses a word that means to see with bodily eyes; while in the second reference, *a little while and ye shall see me....*, he uses a word for spiritual sight.

Jesus would be taken from them, physically; he would die on the Cross and be laid in the tomb, and they would see him no more; that is, as they were accustomed to seeing him, for he would return to them clothed in a new reality: clothed in his spiritual, risen Body. Their eyes would behold him once more.

Yet, again, at the Ascension, he would once again leave them and return to the Father. He would disappear from their physical sight and enter fully into the spiritual world.

But what would be revealed to them on Pentecost was his ever presence in the Church. He would be with them and us where we

could see him spiritually, not so much with the physical eyes but with the heart filled with his Love and the Holy Spirit.

With the Gospel fully revealed and fulfilled in the establishment of the Church, the Christian would face a new challenge: how to live in this physical world when our hearts are set on the spiritual?

It is here that we can see the contrast between the Epistle passage from St. Peter and the Gospel passage from St. John.

In the Epistle passage, the Christian is being prepared to live a holy life in a material world where everything seemingly depends on the here and now. Peter presents a long series of practical precepts for Christian living.

Basically, what we glean from Peter's writing is that the Christian has a responsibility to God, yes, but also to the institutions which God has allowed to be established, a responsibility that does not preclude standing up and against corruption and immorality when necessary.

Christians are to be examples of God's Love in the world, set apart by how they conduct themselves, never putting themselves in the position of being accused of immorality or hatred, and being sound, honest citizens of this world.

We, says Peter, are to live our lives so as to glorify God through them, remembering that, in a real but spiritual sense, we are strangers or sojourners in the world. The world is not our true home. Our true home is in heaven.

The Gospel passage, in contrast to Peter's Epistle depicting us as sojourners in the world, gives us a glimpse of Jesus preparing the disciples for something beyond and greater than the material world, just as real, but not tangible from the standpoint of our bodily senses.

The fulfillment of that moment is realized during the 40 days when Jesus appears to his Disciples numerous times, with his Ascension, and finally with the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

The spiritual reality replaces the physical reality of Christ's Presence — a dual reality. The Church becomes the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit and a point of contact within the physical world for Christians, fulfilling the duality of our nature as both physical and spiritual beings.

The Church becomes the Body of Christ and we, having been washed clean with the Sacrament of Baptism, become its members.

Moreover, in an act of love, God, through his Son Jesus Christ and the operation of the Holy Spirit, is able to dwell within us: he feeds us and nourishes us spiritually with the Heavenly Banquet, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, Jesus present spiritually in the physical elements of bread and wine.

Indeed, our entire relationship with the world through Jesus Christ has been changed. Our reality as Christians encompasses both the physical and the spiritual.

Yes, our relationship with the physical world has changed but, when considering the words of St. Peter, we must remember that our world today is much different; it has been transformed from being solely authoritarian, where we are compelled to obey, to the existence of democratic government where we, as Christians, have a responsibility to participate. Not only to participate, but, often, we Christians are called upon to stand up and demand that government also adhere to those same God-given moral standards.

We, as Christians, are challenged constantly because of our duality — that we are both physical and spiritual beings — our reality as Christians encompasses both the physical and the spiritual.

In the here and now, we prepare for the spiritual hereafter.

With Christ spiritually present in our lives, we, accepting God's Grace freely given to us, are able to transcend the physical world in a spiritual journey that leads us to an eternal life of joy, a joy that no man can take from us.