

Homily for Easter IV

“Receive with meekness the engrafted Word, which is able to save your souls.”

+ We have now reached the stage of Eastertide when we are moved to contemplate, as Jesus moved His own disciples to contemplate, the meaning of that sacred drama which was enacted in their midst. What was this Passion and this Resurrection? These things were remarkable in their own right—a perfect rollercoaster of emotions. But what does it all mean? Where to next? The Church provides for us, in our readings and collect for today, a very simple answer. I think that this answer is so simple, it often eludes us. If someone were to ask you, point blank, the sudden question: *what is the point of the Christian faith?* What would you answer? As Christians, we are sometimes so close to the Faith, caught up in its lived-out experience, that we are prone to reach out for the thing nearest at hand. This is because, I think, the aspect of faith that reaches closest to home, at our particular stage in the journey, seems of most vital importance. And there are two such very popular answers to this question today—both accurate to a degree, but not quite comprehensive as the explanation given to the disciples by the Risen Christ Himself.

In the first place, every Christian, whether an adult convert or one brought up in the Church, becomes convinced, if he or she attends both to common sense and the witness of the Holy Scriptures, of his or her own sinfulness. We become more and more aware of our brokenness, our separation from the awful purity and holiness of a good and righteous God. This takes the form not only of confession—we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and have failed to do those things we ought—these are our actual sins. But also, as we grow in the faith, we come to an equal awareness that, not only are we sinful, but almost helplessly and automatically so—there is no health in us. Our souls cry out for spiritual medicine. The unruly thing that is man must have a ruler to set it right. So, we confess at the beginning of this week’s collect, that it is God Himself who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of men.

It is natural, then, that so many Christians might express the point of Christianity, the meaning of the sacred drama of Cross and Resurrection, as consisting in the forgiveness of sins. After all, this is what Jesus himself speaks to the disciples when He first appears to them in the body of His resurrection: *As the Father has sent me, so I also send you; if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.* As it is an awareness of our sins that drives us into the arms of Jesus, the great Healer of souls, we may be tempted to grasp this thing, and make it alone into our explanation of the Faith.

The second explanation is likewise natural to a serious Christian at a particular stage. Once we have accepted the mercy of Christ, once we have dedicated ourselves patiently to His course of treatment, we come to another awareness—an awareness that Father Brad emphasized last Sunday. We become aware that we are strangers and sojourners. We have experience of that joy that beckons us to lift up the eyes of our hearts and fix our desires on things above. Our minds are renewed, and we begin, more and more, to turn ourselves from the world and toward God. In hope, we turn from this world which is passing away, and direct our thoughts and our steps toward the world that will be, toward eternal life. At this stage, it is natural for us to answer the question which some answer with *the forgiveness of sins*, and now to answer: the point of Christian faith is the next life, the New Jerusalem, life eternal in the new heavens and the new earth. Like the answer of *forgiveness*, *eternal life* is not a bad answer—but both are slightly incomplete.

For sins, our actual violations of God's holy commandments, and also Sin itself—the disorder of our very nature which the old theologians called *concupiscence*, and what St. James calls, in our wonderful translation, the *superfluity of naughtiness*—these things are impediments and diseases. They are things that must be removed or healed, like spiritual cancers or broken bones of the soul. Of course we are in desperate need of forgiveness, and our Risen Lord promises this healing to us. And yes, this world is both passing away, and also incapable of satisfying that deep longing for a higher and better life, for the renewal of Creation. Our hearts are likewise *there to be fixed*, as the collect says, *where*

true joys are to be found. The danger in getting “hung up,” if that’s an appropriate expression, on *forgiveness*, is that we may be stopping too short. If there is any potential pitfall in fixing our eyes on Paradise, it is that we may have gone too far, too fast, and failed to consider carefully both the *how* and the *what*.

And the simple answer which Christ gives us, to His disciples who wonder what’s next, who have been dumbstruck by the Passion and Resurrection, who have sorrow in their hearts at the uncertainty of the future—the answer He gives them as to the point and meaning of it all is this: *I will send Him unto you.* The purpose of the Passion was to open a door—to allow a closeness and a communion. This mysterious *Him* is called *the Paraclete*, translated in our text today as *Comforter*, that is, *He who is to make us strong*. Perhaps the better translation would be *Advocate*—He upon whom we can call for aid, who stands at our side to guide, to warn, and to ward off danger. Christ, even the Risen Christ in His flesh and dwelling still on earth, completes His ministry through a departure. He is to go to His Father, and, united in His flesh to the Father in glory, from there He is to send the Spirit of Truth. It is *His* Spirit, because it will continue and complete His work, accomplishing even those things which, as yet, the disciples are unable to bear, but which Jesus desires to reveal in and to them. *He shall glorify me: for He shall receive of Mine, and show it unto you. All things that the Father hath are Mine; therefore said I, that He shall take of Mine, and show it unto you.* What Christ promises to us and to His disciples is to be gathered up into the very life and communion of the Holy, Blessed, and Eternal Trinity. That is the point of Christianity. Forgiveness of sins removes the obstacle. Eternal life is the inevitable result—but the thing itself is Life More Abundant, the Spirit of the Living God dwelling in us, guiding us into all Truth. Eternal life begins in the now.

But even this best of all answers to the question *what is the point of Christianity* contains the seed of a misunderstanding. It’s a misunderstanding to which we modern people are especially prone. The coming of the Holy Ghost is often characterized in terms of fire—a fire that cleanses as well as purifies. It will come upon the disciples at Pentecost suddenly, with mighty wind and an earthquake.

That the Spirit works sometimes in this remarkable, undeniable, and sudden way we cannot deny. But we should not become fixated on sudden transports, raptures of ecstasy, or the immediate outpouring of extraordinary gifts. The truth is that God is pleased to work in us in the same way as He works in all Creation, and as we see Him at work in the pages of the Holy Scriptures. The Father of lights, in whom there is no variation nor shadow of turning, accomplishes His purification and communion with us—He sends His Fire upon us and in us—but He is a God of the slow burn. Our Advocate is content to stand by us, patiently working away at us, with all the determination and long-suffering of a middle-school Math teacher with a particularly dense student. This is the way we see God at work for his people Israel in the Old Testament, and it is the same patient attitude which Jesus shows to His own disciples, and to us.

The operation of the Holy Ghost in us should not be confused with a certain cast of the emotions. It should certainly not be confused with anything like frenzy or ecstasy. When St. James writes to his congregation, laying out for them the normal disposition of the Christian, in which we are to expect the engrafting of that Word which, once implanted, is strong for the salvation of our souls, these are the words that he uses: *Be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath, for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Wherefore, laying aside all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness*—literally, the overflow or abundance of nothingness—*receive with meekness*—receive with open heart and open mind, in quietness and confidence—the Word, the Living Word of Christ which dwells in us in and through the Holy Spirit.

For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. This word, *wrath*... well, the word-nerd is about to strike again. We associate it with *anger*. But it is deeper than that. *Wrath*, and the older English verb *to be wroth*, are relatives of *wreak*, *wrought*, and *work*. The Greek word translated as *wrath* demonstrates the same correlations of meaning. Though the particular emotion of *anger* is most commonly associated with it, at its root is the concept of “getting worked up,” as we commonly express it. This encompasses not only anger, but any strong emotion—grief, anxiety,

overwhelming desire. These are all those emotions to which, in our sinful weakness, we are liable, *among the sundry and manifold changes of the world*, as the collect puts it.

How will we know the operation of the Holy Spirit in our lives? We will know it when we have allowed Him to quiet our restless hearts. We will sense Him after the fact, after we have held on, in faith, through the storm, after the Cross. He is working in us even now, in secrecy and in silence, beyond our frail imaginations, in ways that we do not always immediately perceive, to fit us—slowly perhaps, but unswervingly—as firstfruits of His creation, made perfect sons and daughters of God, drawn up eternally into His life and peace. This is the promise of our Risen Savior. This is the seal of our baptism. Let us rejoice in this good and perfect gift, in that peace which passes the understanding of this world. + Amen.