

Peace in the Midst of Turmoil

An address for the Holy Supper by the Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, September 19th, 2010

After the Last Supper, and so shortly before His betrayal, arrest and crucifixion, Jesus said,

“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you – not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” ~ John 14:27

These words are striking in themselves, but they are the more remarkable for the context in which they were said. For the Lord of all people was acutely, even painfully aware of every detail of the brutality that He was about to suffer. He had warned His disciples about it repeatedly, and even scolded them for not believing, not accepting what He said. Yet through it all He remained calm, resolute, and inmosty (we must presume) at peace with what was coming.

So He also said a little later in the same context, “These things I have spoken to you that in Me *you* may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer (the Greek really means “have confidence”), I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Today we are commemorating the Lord’s last Passover meal in the ritual we call “Holy Supper.” Now you may or may not be going through a period of turmoil or difficulty in your life, but if you are, consider this: – just as the original event was observed in the quiet seclusion of a private “upper room” with the Lord, apart from the terrible drama that was unfolding in the streets below, and just as the Lord urged His disciples to believe and trust that He would see them through it, so this service can be a refuge from the troubles that plague us in ordinary life, and an opportunity to experience a few moments of reassurance from Him.

So let’s look at that reassurance in context. We’re in a sequence of chapters beginning with John 13, which is unique in the four Gospels because although the Last Supper is *mentioned* nothing is said about the meal itself, only that it occurred “when Jesus knew that His hour had come” (v.1). Instead the emphasis in this Gospel is on the Lord *after the meal* washing His disciples’ feet, and then engaging the disciples in a series of teachings prompted by questions from Peter and Philip. These teachings continue for four full chapters – right up to His betrayal in the garden – and contain some of the most urgent, poignant, compelling and enlightening words He ever spoke to His followers. Here He speaks of His oneness with the Heavenly Father, His promise of the Holy Spirit and the power He would give them to do *even greater works than He had done*; here He gave His “new commandment” that they should love one another, and here assured them of the time, soon coming, when the Spirit of Truth would be fully revealed and He would no longer speak in parables. Then He retired to the garden to pray, John alone evidently being a witness.

The thing, however, that we must not fail to notice is that sprinkled throughout this beautiful series of teachings are two subordinate themes: first, that it would be critical for His followers to keep His commandments, and second, that both He and they were going to suffer before they could experience His peace.

Now nobody likes to suffer. We avoid it, usually, at all costs. In fact we have a culture today in western society that is committed, body and soul, to the relief of suffering – at least our own

personal suffering. Huge industries are devoted to researching it, analyzing it, and selling medical or psychological prescriptions to control it. But the Lord said we are bound to suffer. Why? – Because, in a nutshell, we are born with a self-centered, worldly point of view that has to be subordinated to the more inclusive spiritual principles that constitute the life of heaven. And that change is difficult. It involves a struggle. The native will does not concede without a fight, and when it does concede it suffers.

The only thing that makes this worthwhile from our selfish point of view is that when the old will finally concedes, the new will that replaces it brings a new kind of satisfaction, delight, and inner peace that transcends anything we could have achieved otherwise.

“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.... I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:1,3).

This is a very important passage. We often refer to it with an emphasis on the verse I just omitted – about the many mansions in heaven – because we find it comforting at the time of someone’s death. But the really critical message here is that our way of knowing and respecting God is through the Lord... Jesus... Christ. HE is the embodiment, the incarnation of God, and it is through HIM therefore that we get our best, most complete and most powerful connection with God. Scrolling through the 13th, 14th, 15th and 16th chapters of John we see clearly that He is the one who gives us our example, He is the one who “shows us the Father,” and He is the one who will not leave us orphans but will come to us. He is the vine, we are the branches. He still has many things to say to us, which, when He reveals them will glorify Him. And He said,

“A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me.... Most assuredly I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, ***but your sorrow will be turned into joy...*** Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you” (John 16:17, 20, 22).

Now of course we believe that the Lord **has** come again, and that the revelation we need to relieve whatever sorrow we may have and turn it into joy is here, accessible to all who make an effort to read, reflect and understand – especially to understand the enduring values and processes of spiritual life above and beyond the natural. But it’s not all about reading, and it’s not all about the understanding, as important as these duties are. In the end it is about connecting with the Lord, the Human form and presence of God in our world.

It is for this reason, and again, in the context of a story full of grief, threats, anguish, cynicism, confusion, pain and despair, that the Lord Himself instituted this ritual we are about to re-enact so that we can take a few moments out of our troubled or in any case hectic lives to be refreshed and encouraged by His love and wisdom. For the bread that is offered in the sacrament is a symbol of the goodness of His love, and the wine is a symbol of the truth of His wisdom. There is not, we read, anything holy in these elements themselves (AR 224:13), but they do represent what is holy and good, and the representation is important. Here’s how it works.

First of all, bread is good for us, and in every culture it is a staple food. So in a broad sense it

symbolizes everything good, especially spiritual good, which is love and charity. And so again throughout the ages “breaking bread” together has been a gesture of that love and charity. With this in mind the Lord many times broke bread with His disciples and performed amazing miracles – like the feeding of the five thousand in Galilee – to demonstrate His love and care for them, and He also taught them sometimes in parables about bread. This undoubtedly is part of the reason why the two disciples on the road to Emmaus after His crucifixion finally recognized him in the breaking of bread: it was a familiar ritual and must have brought back a flood of memories for them.

But it all goes much deeper than just this. For the use of bread, we say, is exactly the same on the natural plane as the use of love or charity on the spiritual plane. As bread nourishes the body, so Christian love nourishes the spirit, and so we say the two things *correspond* to each other. The bread is not spiritual, and it certainly is not holy, but because of the correspondence of uses there is holiness IN it for the person who partakes of it with this understanding. The Lord Himself called this bread His body or flesh, but in that saying He was not referring to His physical body, He was referring to the embodiment of His love in all the wonderful works that He had done and will continue to do for those who accept Him and live according to His Word.

And we should note the purity of this love represented in the bread by the fact that it is made unleavened – without any yeast. For yeast is a fungus ordinarily associated with things that are rotting. The reason it makes bread rise is because in its growth and reproduction it releases carbon dioxide gas that becomes trapped in the glutinous flour mixture of the dough, causing it to be “puffed up.” Well, there’s no parallel here to the Lord’s perfect love, and so the yeast is left out, even as it was left out of the bread of the first Passover, to represent freedom from the impurities also associated with Egypt when Moses led Israel from that land back to Canaan.

As for the wine, it is indeed fermented, but what is offered, as at the Last Supper, is the refined and purified *result* of the fermentation process, which corresponds exactly to the truth of the Word that was purified by the Lord in His life as a result of the temptations He endured and overcame. You see, the Lord, when He was born, assumed, or took on the finite limitations of natural life, thus representing the Word itself with all its external commonness and limitations, including the potential for misunderstanding and misrepresentation. But through the combats of temptation, by the power of His love He was able to perceive and clarify the inner meaning and application of every teaching in the Scriptures – much to the dismay of those who would have maintained their domination of others by continuing to distort its meaning.

And interestingly, in the fermentation of wine, although the active ingredient is yeast, representing falsities, one byproduct of its growth is the production of alcohol, which when it reaches a certain concentration eventually kills the yeast, very neatly representing the self-destructive effects of falsity arguing against the truth. In any case the net result is a clear wine or “spirit,” which in the Holy Supper represents the spiritual truth of the Word that the Lord Himself came to know and teach, and that we now have the opportunity to receive. And He called it His blood, not because it was or would become physical blood, but because spiritually His life blood is the pure, inner truth of His Word.

So in another conversation where the Lord called Himself “the living bread which came down from heaven,” He said “If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever,” and again, “Whoever

eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed” (John 6:51, 54-55).

It may be hard, at first, to refine our concepts of flesh and blood so that we don’t dwell too much on the physical body. If so perhaps it will help to observe that the bread and wine of this ritual were introduced by the Lord specifically to *replace* the flesh and blood of the Jewish sacrifices, and by a simple metaphor *transfer* the use and function of those crude exercises into something very sublime *and yet at the same time still physical* so that we can have the benefit of a complete sensory experience – seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, and finally consuming and integrating into our bodies two elements that fully, beautifully and powerfully correspond to His pure love and glorified Divine wisdom.

Of course we don’t *have to* take the holy supper to receive these benefits. The real blessings of spiritual life come from the Lord through the spiritual world. But the sacrament offers a means to fully engage our mind and bodies, to fully focus, recognize and confirm both our need and our desire for the spiritual nourishment we know we can only get from Him. And it allows us to take something away with us in recognition of His unfailing providence.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Matt. 5:6).

The sacrament today will be offered as usual to groups of 12 or so at a time, and you may come forward as directed by an usher or as you feel moved. You are also invited to partake as you wish, either from a common cup or from a small individual cup, and if you cannot drink fermented wine you may still take the bread as a full expression of your desire to be nourished and sustained by the Lord.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 22:14-22
Children’s Talk on the Last Supper (by Rev. Michael E. Ferrell)

John 14:15-31
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