

Trinity 16 (24 September 2023)

“I DESIRE that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

+In the Name...

When you hear the word “tribulation”, does that strike you as a religious word or a secular one? Growing up in a Methodist household, it was purely a secular word, as in having to endure “trials and tribulations”. I was, perhaps, in high school when I was asked for the first time if I was a pre-trib or post-trib dispensationalist? I did not know what any of those words meant, at least not strung together like that. (If you do not speak “Evangelical”, one is asking whether you believe the Rapture will occur before the Tribulation or after.) But that is the Tribulation (with a definite article) as understood by certain Christians to describe the End Times as recorded in the Book of

Revelation. Ironically, here St. Paul is going for a more generic meaning of the word tribulation: lower case “t” and no definite article. This is a general cause of great trouble or suffering. Paul even uses the plural here, so the Church at Ephesus knew they were not limited to just one trial.

I do not mean to speak for everyone, but I like things when they are in order: a place for everything and everything in its place. When a day goes according to the pre-planned schedule, that is a good day! Life in the Church sometimes goes according to a schedule, sometimes not. Before seminary I worked in title insurance; those days almost never went according to the schedule. But a tribulation is more than just the unexpected happening; there is a definite negative connotation to it.

It is easy to get frustrated at the current state of affairs, even if one is not particularly looking for such things. In college I read

several newspapers every day. Now I rarely even look at one except when I am visiting my parents. I used to love following church politics, reading two or three periodicals faithfully. Gone are those subscriptions. “I have plenty to do”, I reason, “just pastoring the parish in NW Portland.” But the last week or two seemed to be particularly frustrating: maybe it was the box elder on Marshall Street that was hacked at like someone was attempting a timber harvest, maybe it was the large “artwork” painted onto the side of the brick staircase leading to the C.S. Lewis door, or maybe it was the poor rhododendrons that are really a testament to fortitude. It is amazing that any of them are still alive considering they have had our sandwich board thrown on them, they have been slept on, and apparently any number of people confuse them with the WC.

So, while I lamented the fact that the city in general, and this neighborhood in particular, have changed so much, I was reminded by

a member that Fr. [now Bishop] Owen Williams had nearly identical problems when he was priest in charge, some 20 years ago!

As I let that reality sink in, I was doing some research on Edward Pusey, a priest in England during the 19th century, whose feast day we celebrated on Monday. He is particularly near and dear to my heart because I was ordained a deacon on his feast day. Furthermore, he was a leader in the Oxford Movement, to which Anglo-Catholic parishes like St. Mark's owe a debt of gratitude. It would seem the son of parents, who both had titles, and sent him to Eton College and then Oxford, would have had the world at his fingertips. A year after graduating, he was elected a fellow at Oriel College. John Henry Newman and John Keble were already there as fellows, and that was where he became enmeshed with the movement. At one point Pusey would be barred from preaching in the university for two years. What heresy do you suppose he espoused to merit such a severe

punishment? Was it merely due to the fact that the sermon was 108 pages long? Granted, they were small pages with lots of footnotes that he would have left out when preaching, but still... The answer is in the title: “The Holy Eucharist: a Comfort to the Penitent”. Pusey dared to declare that Christ is truly present in the Bread and Wine at Holy Communion after the priest has consecrated them on the altar during mass! Yes, I know that you are thinking, “What else?” The doctrine of the Real Presence has been taught at St. Mark’s longer than any of us can remember, and in the Church Catholic since Her beginning. Our friend Dr. Pusey continued on teaching Hebrew (God bless him!) until the two years’ time was completed.

It got me to thinking about the history of the Anglo-Catholic movement in general. Do you know why was it so strong in the colonies (save the United States) and in slum parishes? Simply, unsympathetic bishops sent their Anglo-Catholic clergymen to the

colonies and the poorest parishes because they were the least desirable places to go. In the case of the colonies, there was the added bonus of the bishop not having to deal with the eccentric priest with his “papistical tendencies”.

Another priest of the time period was Fr. Charles Lowder, the first Church of England priest since the Reformation to use the title “Father”. He did his curacy at St. Barnabas, Pimlico, in London, but was later invited to open a mission in Wapping, near the London Docks. Wapping had no church, no school, and technically no communicants. What it did have was impoverished dock workers living next door to ladies of the evening and petty thieves. Fr. Lowder and his followers began preaching sermons on the street (I know what you are thinking: “How very un-Anglican!) and singing Evensong in a rented house. The sermons were interrupted by catcalls and groups of

dancing girls. When the sermons continued, the neighbors threw stones, excrement, and even a dead cat at the preachers!

“Okay,” I thought to myself, “maybe my tribulations are not quite as bad as I had thought...” I have never had anything thrown at me while I was preaching, nor do I have any cause to worry that my bishop will send me to a far-off land merely for preaching the Catholic faith. Of course, it does not matter if my challenges today are better or worse than a priest of 20 years ago or even one of 120 years ago. Better and worse are relative, but even if things are better today in comparison, they might have been worse last week or they might be worse next week. St. Paul’s point is that I as a Christian will be strengthened by the Spirit, that is, the Holy Ghost, in my inner-man, my very being. What’s more, I will know the love of Christ and be filled with the fullness of God.

Like us, the Ephesians were no strangers to challenges. Like the Ephesians, we need to be reminded to be faithful amidst whatever challenges come our way, whether they be political, religious, financial, or health related. As St. Paul told us this morning, Christ will do exceeding abundantly above what we can ask or think. And most of us can think of quite a bit to ask for! Another point is that St. Paul tells us that what God does is for our glory, which in turn makes us ready to live someday in His glory. May we continue in our process of being made ready for that glorious day.

+In the Name...