Easter I (7 April 2024)

“He shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord.”

+In the Name…

When I was in elementary school, report cards were sent home with the student. At the school where I taught they were mailed, but in those days each term’s report was placed in the same manila envelope which our parents had to sign, and then the student returned to his teacher. I remember vividly a particularly bad report card I had in third grade. It was not bad academically. If there had been a comment section and the teacher had been honest, it would have said something like, “won’t shut up!” I was able to get my work done while blabbing incessantly, but apparently it was distracting to some of the other students. [Imagine!] It had been a problem before, and my parents were expecting a better mark in that category. Their hopes were not to be fulfilled that term. I do not remember how, but my mother always knew when the report cards were coming. So, on this particular day I came in the door and high-tailed it to my room. There was no lock on the door, but somehow I felt safer in that room, as if I would be able to avoid the inevitable punishment for not being able to shut my trap. Mom knew, of course, that I had the item of interest in my possession, and it was not long before she came looking for it. I do not remember the punishment I received, but obviously I lived to tell the tale.

As scared as I was that day, it must have been only a fraction of the fear experienced by the disciples the day the Lord came to visit them when they were hiding from the Jews. They had reason to fear for their lives. I probably feared a fate worse than death, even if such a grim expectation was far from reality.

My mother likely knocked. (I honestly do not remember.) Jesus just came *through* the door. I love the way St. John tells us that Jesus still showed the disciples His wounds, as if passing through the door would not have been enough. But perhaps it would not have been enough, because He might have been an “ordinary” ghost, but the prints from the nails proved it was their Lord and Master.

Let’s talk about those prints in Jesus’ flesh. They came from the nails hammered into the cross. I am no handyman, and probably have not hammered a nail since I was a chaplain at a Boy Scout camp over ten years ago, but I do recognize the irony in Jesus being nailed to a cross. Nails are a basic necessity to a carpenter, which Our Lord was by trade. We tend to forget this fact. St. Joseph was a carpenter, and so he would have taught his son the same trade. After all, Jesus had to be doing something in those 20 years between the time that Mary and Joseph found Him in the temple and His entrance into public ministry. I read a fascinating article recently, making the point that not only do we tend to forget Our Lord’s secular profession, so have artists throughout history. When Christ is depicted at the end of His life, he usually appears as a 90 lb. weakling. A more accurate description would be a man tanned and toned from long hours of moving heavy wood from place to place in the sun. The double irony here is that first, God used the tools of Jesus’ trade to cause the death of Him, and second, that the marks of death, even in a healthy young man, turned into symbols of life. Our Gospel reading continues on and we meet St. Thomas. He would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he was able to put his fingers into the holes of Christ’s body caused by the nails in question. But here God took the marks of death and changed them into a symbol of life.

Does God do the same for us as well?

We all face tragedy. What’s more, we have all received the symbols of tragedy. Yours might have been a telegram from the War Department, an ID bracelet from the hospital, a scar, maybe a court subpoena. Today it might more likely be an electronic communication. We do not like these symbols, but we have trouble expelling the memory of them from our mind, even if we rid ourselves of the physical object.

The challenge for us is to remain constant when tragedy strikes, or even when life gives us a series of events, that while not tragic, are enough to completely discombobulate our lives. It was a challenge for the disciples, and such events will challenge us too.

Could there have been a greater tragedy for John, the author of our Gospel lesson, than a dead Jesus? Three years earlier John had turned his back on his career as a fisherman, and thrown in his lot with this carpenter from Nazareth. Earlier in the week Jesus had experienced the first-century equivalent of a ticker-tape parade as He entered Jerusalem. The crowd welcomed Him and called Him a king. Just a few days later a very different crowd turned up demanding His death.

John did not know on Friday what you and I already know: that Friday’s tragedy would be turned into Sunday’s triumph. It is why what he did on Saturday, or maybe what he did not do, became so important. Of course, his activities that day are not recorded, so some speculation is necessary. But we know John was there at the foot of the cross when Our Lord entrusted His mother into John’s care, and he was still there on Sunday when Mary Magdalene came looking. Jesus was dead. His body was lifeless. In one fell swoop John’s trusted friend and future were buried. Yet John had not left. Why was he there? We know that he was not expecting a resurrection. If he could have expected anything, it would have been for the blood-thirsty crowd to come after the followers of the man they had managed to have crucified. Why didn’t John catch the next camel out of town?

There are several practical possibilities: John had promised to take care of Our Lady; maybe he did not have adequate funds necessary for such a journey; or maybe he was just too distraught to plan his next move. But I would like to think he stayed put because he loved Jesus. You will recall that Scripture often refers to John as the Beloved Disciple. One can surmise that such a term would not be used without good reason, especially given that the apostles were already among Jesus’ closest confidants. John was the crème da la crème. He was close to Jesus at the Last Supper in the Upper Room. He was there in the Garden of Gethsemane, at the crucifixion, and nearby at the time of the Resurrection. Did he completely understand Jesus? No. Was he happy at the turn of events of the previous week? No. But did he leave Jesus? Also a resounding “no”.

And his tenacity paid off. John undoubtedly was with the group experiencing the events he tells us of today in the Gospel. He saw the marks of death become signs of life. But then, we know Our Lord was in the habit of using the ordinary to symbolize the extraordinary: ordinary water no longer just represented mortal life, but immortal life through baptism. Ordinary bread and wine no longer represented just physical nourishment, but the very real spiritual nourishment of the Body and Blood of Jesus.

What sign of pain, sadness or tragedy in our lives will God take and use to bless us? I would never insinuate that God wants tragedy to happen in our lives. Evil is an unhappy consequence of mankind’s sinful nature. But God is the Originator of taking the lemons of life and making lemonade. Can such a change happen for us? Of course, but we have to imitate John’s behavior. We have to be loyal for the long haul, through thick and thin. To quote the Prayer Book: “for better or for worse”. If God can change John’s life through tragedy, He can just as easily change ours. Bad things will continue to happen until the Second Coming [literally], but how we react to them should be indicative of our Christian faith. May we be faithful, and attentive enough to see how the Lord might use the adversities of our lives for His glorious purposes.

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