Easter 5, May 19: John 16:12–22

Other Lessons: Acts 11:1–18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1–7

The season is slowly transitioning to the season of Pentecost as the readings start to focus more on the coming of the Holy Spirit and his work in the church. Now of course, for us from hindsight, we understand what Jesus was talking about, but the disciples were all scratching their heads as Jesus told them all these things. “A little while and you will see me no longer.” How little? And where is he going? “And again a little while you will see me.” How little? And where is he coming back from? Well, how about “tonight” and “in 3 days”? That’s right, this is Maundy Thursday, this is the night he was betrayed and sold into the hands of the Pharisees and the high priests. This is something Jesus had predicted and told them plainly a few times already, and yet it is something they keep forgetting. And that’s why he tells them that they will have grief and sorrow, though that grief is but for a little while.

They grieved and were filled with sorrow because they did not have faith. They did have some kind of faith in Jesus, but it was not the right kind of faith. Anybody can say they believe in Jesus, but not everyone actually believes in the same Jesus. A false faith always causes great anxiety and fear and sorrow and grief, because it thinks and looks and expects and believes wrongly about Jesus and God. Look at these disciples, in just a few hours they will disperse and run and hide and lock themselves up. They had a wrong expectation of Jesus. They looked to him as a great teacher, a great role model. They believed him to be a king, but only an earthly king, to set up an earthly kingdom.

They did not understand that the Christ must suffer and die AND rise again on the third day. They did not that their ultimate enemy is not the Romans but sin and death. They did not understand that salvation means not having their own earthly kingdom, or to be free from the oppression of the foreign powers, but of their own sins, which bound them to a greater power, the power of the devil and hell (not that hell was the domain of Satan, as some may believe). So now they grieve and fear because their last 3 years had been for nothing. Their hopes in a new kingdom seemed to have been lost.

This often baffles me that they have such short memory. But this is because the Holy Spirit has not come yet into their hearts to work faith in them. They believed in the coming of the Christ, a savior, a redeemer, but it was not complete until Easter and Pentecost, when the spirit actually comes to them and show them Jesus as the savior and redeemer from sin, death, and the devil. Then they will greatly rejoice and be glad and be filled with eternal peace that the world cannot give and a joy that no one can take away.

But what about us? We have both Easter and Pentecost, right? Where is your joy? We don’t see Jesus and it’s not a little while anymore. Perhaps in a way we are like the disciples in the story. Indeed, we are not thrown into great fear and despair and sorrow and grief like them, but in a little while these disciples too will not see him, that is to say, in about 40 days, Jesus will ascend to the right hand of the father. And it’s not really “a little while” that they will see him again. Where then will they find their joy? Where then will WE find our joy? It is true that we are not surrounded by persecution so that we live in fear, but we are surrounded by the many demands of life that often makes us forget Christ’s words, our faith becomes dulled, and we don’t see, or rather, we only see according to our senses.

In a little while, that is, in 40 days, they will see Jesus no more. Will there still be joy for them, and for us? There is joy because in a little while, that is, 10 days after the ascension of Jesus, the Holy Spirit will descend upon them and upon the whole church ever since. And here Jesus gives us a glimpse of what the Holy Spirit will do, namely to take what belongs to Jesus and declare it to us (v14). This is actually quite significant because the primary gift of the Holy Spirit is in fact the word of God. Jesus says here that the spirit will take what belongs to him and “declare” it to us. Just think about it, everything that belongs to Christ is delivered to us through the word. Christ’s glory, sonship, eternal life, resurrection, heavenly kingdom, his righteousness, all these and everything else are given to us by the word. And what is that word? It is the gospel, the good news of the forgiveness of sins that is freely offered because Jesus has taken our place on the cross. This word of the forgiveness of sins gives everything.

And the first gift is actually faith, which then helps us lay hold of all that belongs to Christ: life, salvation, resurrection, righteousness, etc. The faith that saves, the faith that sees and understands and clings to Jesus is given in this word that the Holy Spirit works in our hearts. And so this is how you know you have the Holy Spirit in you. If you believe that your sins are all forgiven because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, then the Holy Spirit has worked faith in you. And if you have the other gifts OF Christ that comes from the word, then you can be sure that the Holy Spirit is at work. These would be the things that I mentioned last time: the word read and preached, the word that washes (= baptism), the word that feeds and nourishes and strengthen the soul and faith (= lord’s supper).

This word gives joy because it gives us Jesus and all that belongs to him. It gives us Easter and all the benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The joy that Jesus was talking about is not in the seeing of his actual person, but seeing the redemption that he has won. The joy that the first disciples had was indeed in seeing the resurrected Jesus, but it is more than seeing a dead person coming back to life. It is seeing that he died and rose again for the sins of the whole world. It is seeing that he gives eternal life to all. This is the joy that cannot be taken away because it is continually poured out upon us all. And this also means that Jesus intends for us to learn this joy from this word of the gospel that comes from the Holy Spirit through the writings of the apostles and prophets.

No we don’t see Jesus and it is a very long while until we will see him. But the joy that he gives is now here. Joy is not merely an emotion, but it is the blessedness that comes only in the knowledge of sins forgiven, that God loves and cares for us, that we have a good shepherd who leads us through the valley of shadow of death, who prepares a table before us.

We are not in the season of Pentecost yet, but Pentecost has already come. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on us all. We don’t need to wait till Pentecost to know the spirit and his work for us. It is here. The word of God is here. The forgiveness of all your sins is here. This is a most joyous thing, a most liberating gift that this world cannot give. So dear Christians, dear believers, rejoice because Easter is for you, and Pentecost too is for you. The Holy Spirit has taken the gifts of Christ and delivers them to you. Rejoice!