

After You Have Suffered For a Little While

May 4, 2008 | Seventh Sunday of Easter

Lectionary Texts:

Acts 1:6-14

Psalm 68:1-10, 32-35

1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11

John 17:1-11

John 17: 10-11 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.

I received a letter from my daughter this week in which she told me that she was preparing for the final exams of her last semester of college. She added that after she graduates, she does not know what she will be doing or where she will be going, but that I should write to her at her mother's address. I will not go any farther with this story, but I can say that my reaction helps me understand Jesus' concern for the disciples as he prepares to go to his Father by the way of the cross. Jesus, like most parents, does his best to prepare his children, the disciples, to go out into the world on their own. The disciples, like most young people, react with incomprehension colored by a hidden fear, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying."

In today's Gospel, frequently called the "Great High Priestly Prayer of Jesus," Jesus takes a break from addressing the disciples and instead prays to his Father for the disciples. This prayer, overheard by the disciples, could only be understood by them after the resurrection, when they, like us, became "Easter people." The prayer is not just for

the disciples, but also for us, the Church. During this prayer, Jesus focuses on the relationship between the Kingdom of God, where he is going, and the world, where the disciples will be spreading the Gospel.

What is this Kingdom of God, also called the Kingdom of Heaven or the Reign of God? I see the Kingdom as manifested in three ways. First, if we are in Christ, we will be with God in the Kingdom after our personal death. Second, when the lifetime of creation is over and creation is transformed, the new heaven and new earth will be the Kingdom of God. Third, whenever we are aware of the presence of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in this world and this life, the Kingdom of God is at hand. The same Kingdom of God is experienced after death, at the last trumpet, and in this life. As Jesus says in Luke 17, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst.” As our current Luke study puts it, the reign of God is simultaneously “already” and “not yet” here.

What kind of place is this Kingdom of God? First, a kingdom is exactly what it is. A kingdom is not a republic or a democracy. I doubt there will be any elections. You do have the option to “vote with your feet,” not to enter the Kingdom. There is only one authority in this Kingdom, God, and his authority is unlimited. The Sovereign Lord possesses supreme power in his Kingdom. The goodness of the Kingdom is a perfect reflection of God’s perfect goodness. In the Kingdom, we will still have the freedom to choose, as King Peter says in C.S. Lewis’ “The Last Battle,” I’ve a feeling we’ve got to the county where everything is allowed.” Everything is allowed, because in the Kingdom, we will only choose what is good.

Second, this Kingdom is not of this world, even though it is always breaking through into this world. Everything created has fallen into sin and only God can restore creation to its original perfection. Human effort cannot bring about the Kingdom because the Kingdom is already complete. As Jesus says in Luke after he reads Isaiah's prophecy of the Kingdom, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." We do not have the power to "build the kingdom of God." What we have the power to do in this life is to "work for the Kingdom." With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can do our best to love Jesus and follow his commandments—become "Kingdom people" choosing "Kingdom actions." If we do this, the Kingdom will be present in us, in our relationships, and in our church. We are in the Kingdom when we love one another. Love is lived out in gifts freely given and freely received. God give us his presence in the Kingdom because he loves us, not because we have done anything to earn such a blessing. Kingdom actions do not have the purpose of changing the world, although they will do that. Their purpose is to witness in word and deed the saving power of God.

I believe that when receive God's gift of the Kingdom in your life, you will experience great joy. Unfortunately, this joy is only half the story. The reason Jesus was praying for the disciples and the Church was that he knew that along with the joy, they would experience great suffering. Suffering, both physical and mental, is an inherent, unavoidable part of this life. We Christians are not excused from this suffering, although our faith gives us the comfort that God is with us in our pain.

However, even beyond the suffering that comes from being human, Christians share in the sufferings of Christ. Of Christian sufferings, the easiest to understand and withstand is the suffering of persecution. Although the world gives lip service to

“Christian values,” you will find that your Kingdom actions provoke amusement, contempt, or even downright hostility, sometimes from the members of your own family. In other countries, Christianity leads to social ostracism, discrimination, and even death.

As a Christian, moreover, you are subject to a spiritual suffering that may intensify as our faith strengthens. As you worship God in Spirit and Truth, you will be given the grace to sustain the love of Christ in your heart and more consistently follow Christ’s commandments. You will find that, at moments, the Kingdom becomes vividly present in your heart and your life. You may find that as you spend more time in the presence of the Kingdom of God, your ordinary shortcomings, the daily temptations, and little sins become a greater shame and burden to you. The very sweetness of your Kingdom experiences make ordinary life seem a little shallow and pointless. This kind of suffering is a spur to pray for the grace to broaden those Kingdom moments to take in more and more of your life.

As you make more progress, you may start to feel that you have attracted the attention of the adversary. Instead of decreasing, the threats and temptations come on thick and fast, and what little holiness you have achieved starts to crumble. Suddenly, the Kingdom seems far away and God seems distant and silent. During these difficult periods, your faith and your patience may be sorely tested. Keep working and praying for the Kingdom and God will restore your strength.

If you persevere, you may get to a point on your faith journey where God has given you the strength to consider seriously whether you are ready to take up the cross and put your sinful self to death. As Paul says in Galatians, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” I have received a

glimpse of what this is like, and it clearly involves a great deal of suffering and a great deal of joy. God give me the strength to accept Christ's offer to nail my sins to the cross.

Living a life that grows towards the Kingdom of God is a challenge, but we never have to attempt it on our own. The only way we can have Kingdom moments is through our connection with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and with our brothers and sisters in the Church, the Body of Christ. As it says in 1st Peter, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your fellow believers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever.” As Kingdom people, we are never alone. Amen.

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