



Bible Study

May 27, 2015

Acts 23:1-11
John 16:15-23

Acts 23:1-11 (NKJV) -

Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.” And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?” And those who stood by said, “Do you revile God’s high priest?” Then Paul said, “I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’” But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!” And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees’ party arose and protested, saying, “We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.” Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks. But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.”

John 16:15-23 (NKJV) – The Lord said, “All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you. A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father.” Then some of His disciples said among themselves, “What is this that He says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father’?” They said therefore, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is saying.” Now Jesus knew that they desired to ask Him, and He said to them, “Are you inquiring among yourselves about what I 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. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. 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. And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you.”

Commentary -

In today's Gospel reading, Christ foretells His death and Resurrection to His Disciples who, at the time, do not understand. He tells them that in a little while, they will not see Him, for He will suffer death on the Cross, and a little while more and they will see Him again, after He rose on the Third Day. When asked by His Disciples to explain, He does not directly spell out what He means, talking about His crucifixion and Resurrection, but He speaks to His Disciples concerning their own pain and their own suffering, and how it ought to be understood. Christ brings forward a metaphor that is common in the Old Testament prophets of a woman who is in labor, who is suffering pain, but who then gives birth to a child, and that pain is replaced with joy. Again, Christ speaks of their pain being replaced by their joy.

For the people of Judea living in the time of Christ, those who believed in the Resurrection as St. Paul references in today's epistle reading, the Resurrection was something that would happen on the last day. They believed that at some point in the future, God would return to His people and establish His Kingdom on Earth, ruled over through the Messiah, and that the righteous dead would be raised to life in that Kingdom, while the wicked would be raised and face some sort of punishment for their wickedness. This understanding turned out to be partially correct, and throughout His ministry, Christ sought to correct it so His followers would understand the work which He was doing. For example, at the Raising of Lazarus, when He asked Martha if she believed in the Resurrection, and she replied that she knew Lazarus would rise on the last day, He told her that He is the Resurrection.

The larger reality to which Christ was pointing was that His Resurrection from the dead was the beginning of the new Creation, of the new Heavens and the new Earth coming into being. By His victory and judgment of the Prince of this World, by His publicly shaming the powers and principalities of this age, by His victory over the powers of sin and death and Hades, all authority, all power, in Heaven and on Earth was given to Christ. He ascended to Heaven, and is seated, enthroned, at the Right Hand of the Father. This, however, did not end the present age, rather, it inaugurated the age to come, making these days in which we live, and in which the Church has dwelt, the last days. This period is the 'thousand years' prophesied by St. John in the Apocalypse, during which Christ rules in the midst of His enemies. Thus is fulfilled, “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool. The Lord shall extend the rod of Your strength from Zion, rule in the midst of your enemies!” (Ps. 110:1-2).

Like many prophecies, what Christ says to His Disciples has two stages of fulfillment. Frequently, prophecies contain a sign which occurs immediately, which serves as the guarantee that the larger prophecy will likewise be truly fulfilled in the future. The Disciples saw, not long after Christ spoke these words to them, the powerful fulfillment of His words, and His death led to their deep sorrow and mourning, while His Resurrection filled them with joy. This was not the end of this truth, however. As He says to them a few verses later in this chapter, in this world, for the rest of this age, those who follow Christ will face trouble. They will face sorrow. They will face rejection. They will face persecution. They will suffer all the perils of this sinful age in the form of violence, sickness, suffering, and death.

Christ is here teaching however that all of this sickness and sorrow and suffering of the world is not without purpose. Nor is it an end in itself. It does not occur because Christ is indifferent or unaware of His peoples' suffering. Rather, these are the birth pains of a new world, a new universe coming into being. A world in which there will be no more sickness or sorrow or crying or pain. A world in which the knowledge of God will cover the Earth as the waters cover the sea. A world of

eternal life in righteousness and peace for God's people. The suffering that we experience here and now, in this age, is the sign that we belong to Christ. If we belonged to this age, we would prosper in it. This world and its powers are dying, they are fading away before the reality of Christ and His Kingdom, and they thrash violently to inflict whatever damage they can for they know that their time is short.

This is why, in the epistle which we read today, Christ can come into St. Paul's prison cell inside the Roman barracks and stand beside him, and tell the Apostle to take heart. Not because he is going to be set free from prison. Not because his trials are over. St. Paul was, in fact, about to be dragged through several more trials, and ultimately taken to Rome. In the end, all of St. Paul's sufferings, the beatings with rods, the floggings, the stonings, the shipwrecks, the imprisonments, the rejection from town to town, would be crowned with the severing of his head in the city of Rome, the capitol of the Empire that had dominated this world and set itself up over against Christ's Kingdom. The Lord tells St. Paul to take heart not because his sufferings are at an end, but because they are going to continue, and will soon come to a climax. St. Paul could rejoice in all these weaknesses because they were the sign of something greater, of the Kingdom, which St. Paul approached, and finally entered in Christ.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do not despair at the trials and the sufferings of this world. As St. Paul tells us, the whole Creation groans with birth pangs waiting to give birth to the new. And we who belong to Christ, who have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, likewise groan within ourselves as we wait for the hope that we have in Christ to come to pass in His Glorious Appearing. It is this hope that gives us the strength to persevere through all manner of sufferings toward the new life as a child of God that waits on the other side (Rom. 8:22-25). Whatever we suffer in this life we suffer for Christ, and as when a child is born the mother forgets the pains of labor, we know that the gift of Life which is promised to us in the Kingdom will so far surpass these pains that there will be no comparison.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) In today's epistle reading, St. Paul stands trial before the High Priest, the successor of the one who handed over Christ to be murdered. This High Priest was corrupt, a heretic (for not believing in the Resurrection), was persecuting St. Paul and the other Christians, and ordered St. Paul to be physically beaten. Yet, when St. Paul found out he was the High Priest, he refused to speak ill of him. When it comes to the Bishops and Priests who lead God's people today, are you likewise reticent to criticize, or are you quick to find fault and gossip? Does your respect for the positions in which God has placed these men trump whatever flaws they may exhibit as sinful human persons?
- 2) An Anglican bishop once observed, "Wherever St. Paul went there was a riot. Wherever I go they serve tea." When we are honest about our faith in the way we live, and in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, those who are firmly entrenched in this world and its wickedness will become hostile to us. We can either accept this hostility as part of the suffering that will lead to our glory, or we can flee from it through silence, or through compromising the Truth with this present age. Does your life proclaim your faith in Jesus Christ openly and boldly?
- 3) How do you react to the sufferings of this world, both your own and those of others? Do they lead you to doubt and despair? Do they produce anger within you? Or do they reaffirm to you the hope that you have, that on the other side of suffering lies the Glory of God? Do you cling to the promise that one day our mourning will be turned to dancing?

Questions or Comments? FrStephen@stgeorgecharleston.org

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