

Easter III
A Sermon by
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May 3, 2009

Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice; and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.

In today's Gospel, "Jesus is looking beyond the present to the new age which is to come. When He does so, [William Barclay tells us,] He uses a conception which was deeply rooted in Jewish thought. The Jews believed that all time was divided into two ages—the present age, and the age which is to come. The present age was wholly bad, and wholly under condemnation; the age to come was the golden age of God. In between the two ages, preceding the coming of the Messiah, who would bring in the new age, there lay the Day of the Lord; and the Day of the Lord was to be a terrible day, when the world would be shattered and disintegrated into fragments, when all things would be convulsed, and then after that the golden age would dawn. The Jews were in the habit of calling that terrible between-time 'the birth travail of the days of the Messiah.' They actually used this picture of the pain of birth which precedes the entry of new life into the world."¹

"The Old Testament and the literature which was written between the Testaments are...full of pictures of this terrible between-time. [Isaiah wrote,] 'Behold the Day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate; and He shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it' (*Isaiah* 13:9). [And the prophet Joel wrote,] 'Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; for the Day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand; a day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains' (*Joel* 2:1, 2). [These thoughts continued into the New Testament. And so we find in *2 Peter*,] 'The Day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burnt up' (*2 Peter* 3:10). Such was the picture of the travail, the birthpangs of the coming of the Messiah."²

"Jesus knew [these] Scriptures.... And [so] now He [says] to His disciples: 'I am leaving you; but I am coming back; the day will come when my reign will begin and my Kingdom will come; but before that you will have to go through

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 2, 2nd Ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 230–231.

² Barclay, p. 231.

terrible things, with pain like birth-pangs upon you. But, if you faithfully endure, and go through that terrible time, the blessings will be very precious.’ Then Jesus went on to outline the life of the Christian who endures.”³

First, for the Christian who endures his sorrow will be turned into Joy. “There may be a time when it looks as if to be a Christian brings nothing but sorrow, and to be of the world brings nothing but joy. But the day comes [Jesus tells us] when the roles are reversed. The world’s careless joy will turn to sorrow; and the Christian’s apparent sorrow will turn to joy. The Christian must always remember, when his faith costs him dear, that this is not the end of things, that after the sorrow there comes the joy.”⁴

There are two important things to remember “about this Christian joy. (a) It will never be taken away. It will be independent of the chances and the changes of the world. It will be untouchable by any of the activities and assaults of men. It is the simple fact that in every generation people who were suffering terribly have spoken of sweet times with Christ. The joy the world gives is at the mercy of the world. The joy which Christ gives is independent of anything the world can do. It does not depend on what the world gives and takes away, because it is dependent only on the presence of Christ, and it is grounded only in God. (b) [This joy] will be complete. It is characteristic of life that in life’s greatest joy there is always some element of incompleteness. There is always something lacking. It may be that somehow there lingers in it some regret; that there is the feeling that there may be a cloud no bigger than a man’s hand to mar it; that the [thought] that it cannot last is always at the back of our minds. In the Christian joy, the joy of the presence of Christ and of life lived with Him, there is no alloy, no tinge of imperfection. It is perfect and complete.”⁵

Further, “In the Christian joy the pain which went before [it] is forgotten. The mother forgets the pain in the wonder of the child. The martyr forgets the agony in the glory of heaven. As [the poet Robert] Browning wrote of the martyr’s tablet on the wall:

‘I was some time in being burned.
At last a hand came through
The flames and drew
My soul to Christ whom now I see;

³ Barclay, p. 231.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Barclay, p. 232.

Sergius a brother writes for me
This testimony on the wall.
For me—I have forgot it all.’⁶

If a [person’s] fidelity costs him much, he will forget the cost in the joy of being for ever with Christ, and in the simple joy of having proved himself true.”⁷

Second, for the Christian who endures, his knowledge will be full. “‘In that day,’ said Jesus, ‘you will not need to ask me any questions any more.’ In this life there are always some unanswered questions and some unsolved problems. In the last analysis in this life we must always walk by faith and not by sight; we must always be accepting what we cannot understand. It is only fragments of the truth which we can grasp and glimpses of God that we may see; but in the age to come with Christ there will be fulness of knowledge. [Again to quote Browning:]

‘The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;
What was good, shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;
On earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that He heard it once: we shall hear it by and by.’⁸

When we are fully with Christ the time of questions will be gone and the time of answers will have come.”⁹

Third, the Christian who endures will have “a new relationship with God. When we really and truly know God we are able to go to God and to ask Him for anything. We know that the door is open; we know that His name is Father; we know that His heart is love. We are like children who never doubt that their father

⁶ *Easter-Day*, part IX.

⁷ Barclay, p. 232.

⁸ *Abt Vogler*, lines 70–80, inclusive.

⁹ Barclay, p. 232–233.

delights to see them, and that they can talk to him as they wish. In that relationship Jesus says we will ask for anything. But let us think of it in human terms—the only terms we have. When a child loves and trusts his father, he knows quite well that sometimes his father will say no because his father’s knowledge and his father’s love know best. We can become so intimate with God that we can take everything with us to Him, but always we end by saying: “Thy will be done.”¹⁰

And this “new relationship is made possible by Jesus. It exists *in His name*. It is because of who Jesus is and what Jesus did that our joy is indestructible and perfect, that our knowledge is complete, that the new way to the heart of God is open to us. All that we have come to us through Jesus Christ. It is in His name that we ask and receive, that we approach and are welcomed.”¹¹

But I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice, and your joy no man taketh from you.

Sources

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Loucks, James F., Ed. *Robert Browning’s Poetry*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979.

¹⁰ Barclay, p. 233–234.

¹¹ Barclay, p. 234.