

Easter 5 (2024)

I haven't thought of it in years. I suspect the same would be true for you. I am thinking of my high school graduation exercise.

It was held in the school gym.

An ample woman sat an upright piano and played Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance".

Everyone wore blue caps and gowns.

The school principal passed out diplomas as each person's name was called. There was the turning of the tassels.

And somewhere in the ceremony, an older man with gray hair, a judge I believe, gave an address. In his talk, he gave us young whippersnappers some sage advice concerning what lay before us.

That is what I remember from 50 years ago. If it did not happen exactly as I remember it . . . it should have!

What brought this event to mind were Jesus' words recorded in today's Gospel. They come at the end of His Upper Room discourse, just after the Last Supper.

It is not too hard to see the parallel between them and those of our school's commencement speaker. The words of both were of a valedictory nature. Both were designed to push fledglings out of their comfortable nest and into a world that would be different.

The message Jesus gave was intended to prepare the disciples for the time His physical presence would be withdrawn. Yes, He would no longer be walking the roads of Palestine with them, but with the arrival of the Comforter, of whom He had already spoken, there would be new blessings. He highlights three:

Prayer would take on a new character as they learned to approach the Father in His name.

Understanding would increase as they came to see more fully God's plan.

Peace would be theirs, a peace irrespective of what was going on around them.

You and I are likewise recipients of these three promised blessings. Let's look at each beginning with **prayer**.

There is no reason to believe that Peter, James, John and the rest were not praying men already.

They went to the Temple and did the things good Jews did.

More than that, during their time with Jesus, they had come to bring their needs to Him . . . to ask Him to do things only God could do, for

example, still the wind of a storm (Matthew 8:25).

They were right to do both: observe the temple rites and to bring their requests to Jesus.

But the time was coming when the Temple, including its sacrifices and priests, would be rendered redundant. Jesus Himself would replace all three.

The new order arrived immediately after Jesus cried out from the cross, “It is finished.” At that moment, the heavy curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple . . . that barrier that kept people out . . . was torn in two from the top to the bottom, as by an invisible hand.

What this meant was that the way into God’s presence had been opened. Jesus’ people could now come boldly into the presence of the Almighty and make their requests known.

Picture back when we had a President with young children in the White House. In the case of President Obama, it was Malia and Sasha. In the case of President Trump, Baron.

If one of these children had charged into the Oval Office, instead of being thrown out and sized by the Secret Service, they would likely have been welcomed and embraced. The President would have taken time to listen to what was on their minds.

Well, the same is now true of you and me. In our baptism, we were united with Jesus the King (that is what Messiah means) and grafted into His family. We were made sons and daughters by adoption and grace.

What does that mean in practical terms?

It means you and I can now come into His “Oval Office” and make our wants and desires known.

We don’t have to be cleared by the FBI or anyone else. The question is: Are we availing ourselves of this great privilege?

Or -- are we trying to go it alone. A parcel can get mighty heavy if you are carrying it around all by yourself. You don’t have to.

The Father loves you. He wants to help with that parcel.

What is on your mind and heart this morning? Worried about finances? Matters of health? Broken relationships? Mistakes of the past – has God really forgiven me? Something else?

The door is open. Enter. Ask in Jesus’ name.

Actually, we need to make this – asking in Jesus’ name -- a practice both before we go to bed and upon arising each morning. Why not give it a try. You have not because you ask not.

So, the first thing that will change when Jesus goes away and the Spirit comes will be prayer. It will be enhanced. That is Jesus’ initial message to the disciples in this address.

But something else will change as well – their **understanding**. It too will be enhanced.

Listen to what He says in verse 27: “**I came forth from the Father, and am come into the world: again, I leave the world, and go to the Father.**”

There you have Jesus’ mission in outline form.

He came down according to His Father’s will to deal with the mess we humans had got

ourselves into. He accomplished that mission by becoming sin for us and paying sin's penalty. He returned to the Father taking with Him our redeemed humanity, and He is now reigning.

As Jesus spoke of His mission, the disciples seemed to have a burst of momentary understanding, but it was indeed momentary.

Soon, following His arrest in the garden, confusion and fear would again reign in their hearts. They would be scattered.

But that would change. Following Jesus' resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, their eyes would be opened to what God was up to. Their understanding would develop and grow.

And that is what we pray will happen to us. It's okay to be a baby Christian in the beginning, but we don't want to stay there. There is an old Gospel song that says:

*More about Jesus would I know,
More of His grace to others show;
More of His saving fullness see,
More of His love who died for me.*

The operative word is ‘more’. That is what we seek and pray for.

This ‘more’ is not just to satisfy our intellectual curiosity but it is so we may be better and more effective witnesses in the world. You cannot testify to or explain what you do not know and understand.

None of us is there yet. Our one great desire should be ‘more’. ///

Prayer, understanding and finally **peace**. That is the third blessing Jesus promises to His believing people. In verse 33, He says:

“These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”

How can we have peace when we see so many bad things going on around us? In the news and in our own backyards?

How can we have peace when innocent people suffer? When sickness and death hover over either ourselves or those we love?

How can we have peace when Christian civilization, our very way of life, is under attack from the relentless forces of secularism, materialism and hedonism (‘hedonism’ being the relentless quest for pleasure at any cost)? How can we have peace while America and the West squander their spiritual inheritance?

Jesus gives us our answer, “I have overcome the world.” By “world”, He means the world

order, the world that that has set its face in opposition to its Creator and His Christ.

As followers of Jesus, we believe the decisive battle was won on the cross. Satan's prison house was charged and opened. Death itself was defeated, and thus the chief weapon of tyrants both ancient and modern was snatched from them.

Even so, scrummages continue, battles remain to be fought. That is where fit in. We are to join in the battle for truth, beauty, honesty, honor, those things that are of good report.

In the midst of this great endeavor comes the peace that no one can snatch from us.

God's peace comes not from the absence of trials, but from the knowledge we don't walk alone. God is with us whatever life lands us, and I mean wherever.

The message of Jesus' valedictory address made on the eve of His crucifixion urgently needs to be heard in the Church today. We need to take new courage.

We don't need to be defeated. We still have good news. Jesus still saves. The call of the Gospel is still powerful and can change lives and overcome evil.

Again, to summarize Jesus' parting words to the disciples: Embrace prayer. Seek understanding. Be filled with the peace that transcends circumstances.

Showers of blessings await those who hear and do Jesus' words. Will you be one of these?