

*“A little while and ye shall not see me, and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.”*

From the sixteenth chapter of St. John

The Gospels for today and the next several Sundays all come from the same section of St. John. They are all taken from the address that Jesus makes to his disciples at the last supper. When we think about the Last supper, we are most likely to remember how Jesus set up Holy Communion - taking the bread and wine of the Passover supper and saying, “This is my body ... This is my blood.”

But St. John talks about Holy Communion in connection with one of Jesus’ feeding miracles, not in his description of the Last Supper. St. John’s account of the Last Supper begins, as Jesus washes the feet of his disciples - illustrating for them, how they are supposed to serve one another, rather than trying to control and dominate each other. He continues with a speech several chapters long, and then ends with a prayer he addresses to his Father.

In today’s selection, he is trying to get the disciples ready for the fact that he is about to leave them. It should not surprise us that they have a hard time figuring out what he means. He has told them several times that he is on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die and rise again, but they had resisted any such idea all along.

He says, “A little while, and ye shall not see me: and again, a little while, and ye shall see me, because I go to the Father.” Jesus is talking about two separate events. First of all, the disciples will not see him for a little while after he dies and is buried, and then they will see him again on Easter. Next they will not see him when he goes away into heaven at his Ascension, and then, after a longer little while, they - and we - will see him again at the last day.

The disciples find this very confusing. They say to one another, “What are these little whiles all about? What does he mean by seeing him and then not seeing and going to the Father? We can’t tell what he is talking about at all - we cannot tell what he saith.”

They may think they have hidden their puzzled mumblings from Jesus, but he knows exactly what they are thinking and saying. He says, “So, you are asking one another about little whiles and seeing and not seeing? You can’t figure me out? Let me see if I can draw you a clearer picture of what I mean.”

“Here is how it is going to be - you are going to be sad and the rest of the world is going to be happy - but then your attitude is going to turn from sorrow into joy.” Jesus is trying to explain to his disciples what we already have the advantage of knowing. When he is executed on the cross, his disciples will be sad and afraid, but his enemies will be glad. Then the disciples will be happy again when he rises from the dead on Easter.

The second part of it is, that they are going to feel deserted when he goes back to heaven to be with his Father- Forty days after Easter. He will turn that sorrow into joy in two ways. First, he will send them the Holy Ghost to keep them company, and then he will come back to earth-after a little while, which has already lasted about two thousand years.

Jesus goes on to say, “If what I have said doesn’t clear it up, then think about this. Labor pains are a horrible thing for a woman going through childbirth, but the joy of seeing the baby when he comes finally, overwhelms the memory of the pains of labor.”

“When I rise from the dead, when I send the Holy Ghost, and when I come back to earth, you are going to be so happy, that you will forget all about whatever sorrow you endured because I was not here. Ye now therefore have sorrow: but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no man can takeaway from you.”

At the beginning of today’s epistle, St. Peter addresses the Christians, to whom he is writing as “Strangers and pilgrims.” That explains exactly what Jesus has been talking about. In this world, we Christians are in a sort of interim state.

We know that our sins have been forgiven time in and time out, and we know that we are not perfect. We know that Jesus conquered death by rising from the grave, but it hasn’t happened to us yet. God has promised us that we are going to heaven in the end, but we are, quite clearly, not in heaven yet.

We are trapped in a state of being perpetually in between - we are in the midst of a rather extended “little while.” We know it won’t go on forever, but we still can’t be sure just when it will end.

As far as this world is concerned, this is not our real home. In the deepest sense, we don’t really belong here - we are only strangers. We are not expecting to hang around here forever, either. We are only pilgrims - passing through - on our way to somewhere else. This life is exactly what the Prayer Book says it is - transitory - passing through.

In baptism and confirmation, Jesus gives us his spirit to keep us going until the last little while has ended. His spirit is the Holy Ghost - the presence and the power of God in our hearts, working on us from the inside to change us into exactly what he wants us to be - what St. Paul calls, “No more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.”

Easter IIIa