

The Second Sunday of Christmas

1 Peter 4:12-19

Every year it surprises us somewhat, does it not, those of us who are in Church every year to hear it, even though we know that it is coming, the gruesome account we heard in our Gospel reading, of the massacre on the innocent children of Bethlehem. Well, it surprises me every year, somewhat, although I am aware that it is coming; except, of course, in those years when Christmas Day falls so late in the week, or so early, that there is only one Sunday of Christmas, so that we do not have to hear about it.

Outside, out in the world, Christmas is pretty much over with. Out in the world we have pretty much moved on. But in Church we continue to celebrate Christmas until the Eve of Epiphany. And it is always somewhat surprising, at least to me, although I know that it is coming, or at least it is somewhat disturbing, to have to hear this gruesome account as part of the very celebration of Christmas, of peace on earth and good will toward men.

But then, this is the world as we know it, is it not, and we know that very well, do we not? Terrible things happen, things like the massacre on the innocent children of Bethlehem. We hear about it all the time, do we not?

Some of us have had terrible things happen in our own lives, to ourselves or to someone we loved, dreadful disasters or death or disease, evil events that were just that, evil, and nothing other than evil, and it would be an insult for any one to try to comfort us by lying the evil away and explaining to us exactly how the evil that happened was perhaps a good thing, and definitely so.

Those of us who have not had such terrible things happen to us, we hope that we never will, or anybody we love. Some of us even manage to *assure* ourselves that they never will; that truly terrible things happen only to other people, to people who are not us, and not quite as good and godly. Some of us might tell ourselves that, even though we know better, and do not buy into the lies of false teachers who misuse the name of the Lord our God to claim that truly terrible things never happen to Christians. Even though we know better, it gives us some peace of mind to assure ourselves that truly terrible things will never happen to me, nor to anyone I love, to imagine that this is what it means to be a Christian, a beloved child of God, that this is what the love of God is, and peace on earth and good will toward men.

Even if it might not surprise you, perhaps because you knew it was coming, or just because you knew it is there, in Holy Scripture, it is still a bit disturbing, is it not, to have our nice Christmas atmosphere of peace on earth and good will to men shattered by having to hear about the massacre on the innocent children of Bethlehem.

And I do believe that when terrible things do happen to ourselves, or to someone we love, we all tend to react with surprise, with disbelief and denial, even if we knew it all along, that it *could* be coming. We cannot quite cope with the real world being as it really is. That is why we take refuge in dreams and fantasies to convince ourselves, and those to whom they happen, that the truly terrible things that happen are not really truly terrible, that it is not all that bad, that *God will never give you more than you can handle*, as the Koran falsely teaches, and as so many Christians quote it, thus misusing the name of the Lord their God.

Beloved, writes the holy Apostle Peter, *do not be surprised at the fiery trial as though something strange were happening to you*. With this, though, the Apostle is teaching something much more profound than merely the observation of the obvious, that bad things do happen, and that this is the real world as it really is.

But rejoice insofar as you share the sufferings of Christ, as he also writes it, *that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed*. He sets before us the joy that awaits us, according to the promise of God, and all who hear His promise in faith, the heavenly life in the presence of God, where there shall be no more suffering, no more sorrow, where all things shall be filled with His goodness and His glory. And he sets before us the assurance we have, that what God promises shall be ours, and is, in fact, ours already, *with His promise*; for he reminds us of the price the Son of God has paid to give His promise to us. He reminds us that in our sufferings, Christians share in the sufferings of Christ Himself, who for our salvation suffered so much more than we have ever known sufferings, and ever will, eternal death and damnation, His own judgement against sin, His wrath at all wrongdoing and wrong, His holy hatred of evil. Such is the love of God for us, so certain and secure His promise.

The Apostle also reminds us that our sufferings and sorrows, as real as they are, actually do serve for our good. *You share the sufferings of Christ*, as he writes it, *that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed*.

In our sufferings we die away from our love of sin, and of this world. We learn to take comfort, for real, in the assurance that this world is not all there is.

And we learn to rejoice that this world of suffering and sorrow shall not be forever, that our eternal home is with God in glory. And we come to see how utterly dependent we are upon the goodness of God, and His mercy, as we see how frail in faith we are, how poorly we react to our sufferings and sorrows. *It is time for judgement to begin at the household of God*, as the Apostle also writes it.

Judgement begins at the household of God, also, when the Apostle reminds us to rejoice *insofar as you share the sufferings of Christ*, and admonishes us: *let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler*. The suffering we bring upon ourselves by our own ungodly behaviour, for that we have no one to blame but ourselves, nor should we be proud of them; with regards to those, we should not claim to be martyrs and victims of wrong, other than our own.

If you are insulted for the name of Christ you are blessed, writes the Apostle, *because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you*. But if we bring the animosity of unbelievers upon ourselves by making their lives miserable, well, then their animosity is no more than we deserve. After all, making life miserable for others is *sin*, is it not? Well, it is. It is murder *en miniature*. And as such, it is part of what is prohibited in the commandment of God: *You shall not murder*.

And if unbelievers resent you for your self-righteousness, how is that good of you, or because you *meddle* in things? How is that sharing in *His* sufferings, who suffered *innocently*? After all, self-righteousness is *stealing*, is it not? Well it is; it is claiming something that is not yours.

The idea of being a *meddler* is particularly interesting here. It is translated from a Greek word that literally refers to *somebody who inserts himself in the oversight of another*, that is: in the responsibilities entrusted to somebody else.

The Apostle lists this alongside being a thief and a murderer; yes, for to tell others how to administer that for which they are responsible is to *steal* their responsibility from them, and to make their lives miserable. It is also disobedience against God; as another Apostle writes it: *There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed*.

The responsibilities entrusted to others rather than to you are entrusted to them rather than to you by God. By not allowing them to be responsible for that for which they are responsible, you deny God His lordship!

Micromanaging others is usually not good leadership; it gets in their way of them doing their best and being their best selves.

And others will *not* become all they can be when you force them to be you! Micromanaging is poor leadership in particular when imposed upon others by someone who is actually not the leader. Like when somebody gives his or her Pastor orders as to how to conduct his ministry, or makes decisions behind his back regarding the teaching and worship of the church, although such decisions are his to make. Now, for one thing, it is not *wise* to make your Pastor miserable in his ministry to you. *Obey your leaders and submit to them, says Holy Scripture, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Moreover, meddling in the ministry is to usurp an authority that is not yours; to steal, in other words; and to rebel against God. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement.*

The sufferings and sorrows we bring upon ourselves by our own inconsiderate and otherwise ungodly behaviour are but the beginning of the judgement of God being executed upon sin in us. *It is time for judgement to begin at the household of God,* writes the Apostle, as we hear it today.

And judgement does begin with our sufferings; in our sufferings and sorrows it becomes clear, constantly, how much we rely on this world and set our hopes to this world and seek our happiness in this world, and how little we trust in the goodness of God, and how we must therefore stand condemned before Him. And seeing that, we are thrust back into His mercy, forced as we are by seeing the frailty of our faith, to seek mercy with Him, and put our trust in His promises.

In this sense, even the sufferings we bring upon ourselves are *sharing in the sufferings of Christ*; through them His work is brought to completion in us. When we deliberately take it upon ourselves to bear our burdens patiently, looking to His love, as His love is shown to us in what He has suffered for us, then we are sharing in His sufferings. *Therefore, as we hear it today that the Apostle writes it, let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. And as we share with Him in His sufferings, we are conformed to His goodness to share His glory with Him; and we shall, for ever, when He comes.*

Glory be to God on High, and on earth peace, good will toward men! Amen.