

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

I Peter 2:11-20

Once again it seems, at first glance, that our Easter Epistle reading is really not all that Easterly; that what is presented to us in the midst of the Feast for the Resurrection of our Lord is really not all that festive. In our Epistle reading today, we continue to be reminded, as we have been so far this Easter, of the life we are called to live as the Church of Christ, and as His Christians, having died and been buried with Him in Baptism, and been raised to a new life with Him in His own life. And once again, it seems that we continue to hear mostly that we are supposed to have a miserable life in this world, and put up with all kinds of injustice.

Well, actually we go backwards today, one might say, rather than *continue*. For what we hear in our Epistle reading for today is exactly that which goes right before that which we heard in our Epistle reading last Sunday.

Well, sometimes backwards is in fact the way ahead. Particularly this holds true in the life of the Church of Christ. True renewal in the life of the Church of Christ has always mostly been about rediscovering and returning to that which was before, which had either itself been lost and forgot, or it had been forgot how precious it is; whereas, on the other hand, the introduction of anything genuinely new in the life of the Church of Christ is usually not really real renewal, either, but rather a return to our old ways, and the ways of the world, discerning not the things of God but rather the things of Man.

It seems that today, also, backwards is the way ahead: the joy of our resurrection life is set before us in a somewhat backward way. So let us begin at the end of our reading, rather than cut to the chase, which today would be to begin at the beginning; the beginning will be where we will end; as where it all ends is where it all begins today; well there we are.

At any rate, the last portion of what we hear today presents us with some common sense observations. *Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh.* We are aware already, I think, most of us, because we have heard it often enough, and certainly we Lutherans have, that we should *fear and love God, so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honour them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them,* as our Catechism says it, because Holy Scripture teaches it.

Now, it is only common sense that the command of God applies not only when it is agreeable to us, but also when it is not; that when He commands His Christians, and all people, actually, to obey the laws of the land, it applies not only to those laws we ourselves agree with, and that when He commands obedience to those whom He has set in authority, it applies not *not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh*; just as our obligation to honour and obey the Word and will of God altogether not only applies when it is agreeable to us, but also when it is not; otherwise our obedience would not be obedience at all, except to ourselves.

For this is commendable, the Apostle then goes on to write, *if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer for that, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.* This, also, is only common sense, is it not? Patiently, without wallowing in bitterness and self-pity, to bear the burdens that fall upon you in life through no fault of your own, that is admirable; whereas, on the contrary, to wallow in self-pity and bitterness over the troubles you bring upon yourself by your own bad behaviour, that is just pathetic. And it is outright despicable to claim the status of victim when you are caught and called out for your bad behaviour; or to pretend, and only pretend, to apologise, with the kind of apology that has become so common in our day and age: to declare that you have done no wrong, but are sorry for the hurt your actions have caused those who are so stupid or evil that they do not understand and acknowledge that you ever only did the right thing!

Bearing the burdens you have brought upon yourself by your own bad behaviour does not make you a hero, and even less a martyr for Christ; in fact, by pretending that is does, you bring shame upon Him!

So often when Christians are reminded of the command of Christ to turn the other cheek when struck, particularly in relation to a specific situation, they will respond with indignation: *So she can behave any way she likes, and I have to be good and kind to her? Well, somebody else's bad behaviour is his or her problem before God; your problem before God is your own bad behaviour!* And any disobedience against His Word and will, including His admonition to follow His example in bearing injustice with the patience of faith, is bad behaviour! Now, obviously, this goes way beyond common sense. It is true, nonetheless. As we hear it today that the Apostle writes it: *When you do good and suffer for that, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.*

How is this right? Well, in human terms it is not. But ultimately it is *before the judgement seat of Christ we must appear*, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it, *that each may receive what is due for what he has done, whether good or evil*. And before Him we have no right to claim. With Him we have earned nothing but eternal death and damnation; and only His goodness and mercy, only what He has suffered for us, against all right and reason, and nothing else, entitles us to receive anything other than our due reward.

It is only common sense that when He commands obedience to those He has set in authority over us, it applies *not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh*; otherwise, His command would not apply at all, not as His command; it would be meaningless.

The Apostle also applies good advice to the command of God, when he writes: *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God: that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people*. Responding to the bad behaviour of others with bad behaviour of our own will not make them to think of us kindly and reconsider their bad behaviour; on the contrary, it is more likely to confirm to them that we are troublemakers, and that treating us badly is the only way to make us behave. As the saying goes, *you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar*.

Again, though, this goes beyond good advice; as the Apostle writes it: *This is the will of God!* Which means that it is nothing more than what we owe to Him, who has Himself borne so much more injustice from us that we will ever have to bear in this world, and *for us*, and yet forgives us, freely, and at the greatest cost to Himself, the most severe sufferings and death.

And it is, in fact, the love He has shown to us, and what His love has won for us, that should be our motivation. As we hear it that the Apostle writes it: *Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God*. With His sufferings and death He was won for us full forgiveness for all evil and ungodliness of ours, and set us free from all guilt and debt and impurity before His judgement. At the most awful cost to Himself He has set us free to live with Him in His love, in this life, and for ever, in His eternal life. Such is His love for us. And this love we should treasure rather than trash it, *using your freedom as a cover-up for evil*, as the Apostle writes it.

Sometimes, this is what unbelievers will say about Christians: that we think that being Christian means that we are entitled to behave in any which way we please. And sometimes some who have claimed to be Christian have given unbelievers ample reason to think that that is indeed what we think. And that is not a good testimony to the faith, and to the love of God; certainly, it is no way to win unbelievers over for the faith, or even make them to enquire into the love of God. Obviously it is not.

And we are called to be servants of God in that which is His greatest purpose: the salvation of sinners. That is also part of what we learn today: *Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honourable, writes the Apostle, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.* By living the life our Saviour calls us to live, as we owe it to Him, we are to challenge unbelievers in their animosity against the faith as well as the faithful, as the first step of making them willing to listen to our testimony, so that they also may *glorify God on the day of visitation*, that is: when the Son of God comes in glory. This is the goal: that they may be led into the faith, so that they may rejoice with us and receive Him with joy when He comes to judge the living and the dead, and take all His own to Himself to be with Him in glory forever.

Well, it is *one* goal He has with this; another goal is that we ourselves may be preserved in our life with Him, and grow in our life with Him, and begin to be conformed, already now, to His own goodness and glory.

Again, for us to live in His love, and live out His love, it is the beginning of our resurrection life; as the Apostle writes it at the beginning of what we hear today: *Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.*

Here, at the beginning, is where it all ends; and where it ends is where it all begins! We are sojourners and exiles in this world. This world of suffering and sorrow is not our home. Rather, our home is with Him who died in shame for the sin of the world, and now lives in glory, and with whom we shall live in glory, also, because He died in shame, to make us sinners right with Him, and righteous before His judgement.

Worthy is Christ, the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. *Amen.*