

Seventh Sunday After Easter

The Parish, 21 May 2023

I was able to get last minute clearance from Jamie to tell a SC story. I will park mine in the middle of my sermon, but I wanted you to rest assured that a Lowcountry story is on its way.

It's been traditional to read from the first letter of Peter during Easter, and we have been doing that for the last 6 Sundays. We wrap that up today. Next Sunday is Pentecost.

It's not hard to see why because of the way the letter opens. Perfect Easter praise for the resurrection of our Lord. It brings me joy to restate it on this final Sunday of the Easter season.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade. This inheritance is being kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, *though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials*. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

Throughout the letter, Peter is concerned to reassure us who, as he puts it, suffer grief in all kinds of trials. We just heard the same thing in our text today. Peter writes:

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so

that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”

It is important to say that Peter’s concerns for the congregation he addresses are the same concerns he has for us here today.

The fiery trials, as he puts it, that come upon us in the course of our lives:

The painful loss of a child

The death or suffering of a loved one

The painful infidelity of a spouse

The sudden attack of a disease

The cruelty of afflictions of various kinds

The sleepless nights we lie awake worried about our children, an aging parent, our finances, decisions we must make, that we are unsure about

You have full permission to fill in the blanks in your own life

When Peter says ‘do not be surprised’ he is not saying, ‘get used to it’ but something very different. We have a living hope. An inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.

And the reason we have this is because Jesus Christ chose to walk straight into these fiery trials. He did not come to earth to ride around our troubles but to embrace them, to hold us more dearly than the throne he had in heaven, and the love he shared with the Father.

The Catholic author Dorothy Sayers put it this way. It is a quote that will forever stay with me.

For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is— limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile. He was about his father's business. He was making himself present for the trials of our life.

Through Isaiah, God had promised Israel, “when you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame will not touch you.”

In Jesus Christ, we have a savior who walked through fire and the flames did touch him, so that, as Peter says, he would store up for us an eternal heritage, provide a dial tone to him in whatever trials arise in our life. For now, inside our trials, he says, we remain shielded by God's power.

I have spent a good deal of time at Mepkin Abbey, on the Cooper River north of Charleston. Henry and Claire Booth Luce bought the original plantation, they are buried there, and they gave it to the Trappist monks after their death. They used to raise chickens, and now, last I heard, are in the bee business.

On one visit, after a hurricane, I noted a big tarp covering a section of a fallen live oak. I asked the monks what was going on. They said an artist was working there. Sometimes you could hear him under the tarp, sawing, and chiseling away.

I visited some time later and the art work was complete. I was stunned. He had carved a life-sized wooden sculpture depicting the flight to Egypt from Matthew's Gospel. Mary and Joseph. The donkey. The baby

Jesus carefully bundled in his mother's arms. It was polished to a high luster.

But truly special was a seat he had built, so you could literally climb up some handy steps and sit in the very center of this biblical scene.

I thought it was very charming.

As I reflected on the reading from Peter today, and over the past weeks, my mind went in a different direction.

From the very, very first, Jesus and the Holy Family passed through a fiery ordeal, so that our lives in them might be made clean and new. It was not a charming idea but a real one, fit for our real life: a flight to Egypt. All the ingredients we know arise in life. Danger. Haste. Warnings in dreams. Massacre of innocent children. Mary protecting her child. Joseph's furrowed brow. *How will we get through this?*

A question familiar to all of us here this morning.

Jesus was constantly on a journey across the landscape of our broken lives. The hem of his garment was always trailing where the poor, the broken, the sick, those in despair, could touch it. The stuck, at wits' end. He shoo-ed no one away. 24/7, it was his life on earth, with us. "Throw the net on the other side," he would say. Trials also bring great catches, with the Master at the helm.

When we cried out, do you not care that we are perishing—and at times it feels like that—he said. Yes, I am in the stormy sea here next to you. I made the sea and the dry land. And I can calm it, because I am sharing your fear with you and learning its contours, its height and depth. How it scares you in the night watches.

And he rebuked the sea, "Be still."

The road that led to Egypt and back again, through a season of senseless, murderous rage, is the same road that passes through his backyard, across the sea of Galilee, at a well in Samaria, down to Jerusalem, and

finally up the path to Calvary, where his final work was done. The fiery trial that shows his fierce love for the world. Makes him our companion in the valleys.

We have not a high priest who cannot understand our fiery trials, but one who knows them inside and out, and because of that, is transforming them *and us*.

Now, in our present time, Peter tells us that fiery trials are not strange interruptions on an otherwise placid and serene landscape, but are the pilgrimage realities we share with Christ.

I want to say this.

For us who have faith in him, God uses the passing of time to mold us, under trials and afflictions, to be formed unto the likeness of his own beloved Son.

Time doesn't heal all wounds. God's time, lived out, shared by Jesus with us, heals all wounds. That is his solemn promise. He bet his life on it.

And so, He asks us to take a seat inside that sculpture, and learn how it fits our days, learn Him who made it, learn Him who moves us forward through valleys of the shadow of death. Learn to hear his very own voice, when lost and floundering in life. "Fear Not."

When the trivial irritations of life would crowd in on me, my brave wife—she had a carved seat Jesus asked her to take through a long and fiery trial—she would turn to me and say. "Chris, it's part of the deal." She had learned, under affliction, to hear a voice stronger, an eternal, road-tested, loving voice. The voice of her Lord.

I could not speak with her at the end of her life, but only look into her eyes. I think she would say to the Parish, robed in white, from the throne of him whom every grief hath known, "This, too, is part of the deal, the final leg of our shared journey with Jesus."

Here, today, let Jesus teach us to listen for his voice, which comes as it truly is from him, in the midst of trials and where we need him most.

As the Gospel of John says, “I have kept them in the name thou hast given me.” His last words before facing his last hours on his final journey with us, he underlines the purpose of his entire mission:

“Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, even as we are one.”

During the trials of life, there he says, “In this world you will have troubles. Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Many of you will know the serenity prayer, written by Reinhold Niebuhr and used now at AA meetings. You may not know the whole prayer, however. Let me end with it.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; The courage to change the things I can; And the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time; Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace; Taking as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; That I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.

The throne Jesus has in heaven and the seat he takes beside us, inside the trials of life, are one and the same. Both have the power to raise us to the Father and to keep secure our eternal life in Him.

“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever.”

