Victory: The Paschal Mystery - Lenten Reflection #5 (2012)

“Understand now, therefore, beloved how it is new and old, eternal and temporal, corruptible and incorruptible, mortal and immortal, this mystery of the Pascha.” - Melito of Sardis, On the Pascha

Last week we were thinking together about joining our sufferings with those of Jesus.

We made a pretty good case for it, I think, by answering the 5 W’s. Some we answered in more detail than some others, but we made our case.

I think we also recognized, however, that we had only looked at half of the Paschal Mystery.

Properly, the Paschal Mystery comprises both our sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Now, chronologically, it would be premature for us to fully celebrate the victory of the Resurrection since we are only just coming up on Palm Sunday, but Lent is certainly a time to anticipate that victory. And trying to imagine what that means is certainly an appropriate Lenten activity.

Our Christian hope and Lenten desires are to share in both the struggle and the victory, and it seems to me, that we are assured of this in so many ways.

St Paul said it clearly in his letter to the Romans (Rom 6:5), “If we have grown into union with Him through a death like His, we shall also be united with Him in the resurrection.”

He couldn’t be clearer on the material conditional relationship between our “dying with Him (the antecedent)” and our “being Resurrected with Him (the consequent).”

From this implication, we can construct two statements: the first is that “we cannot have one without the other,” and this should be our motivation for living the passion with Jesus (not B without A.)

The second is that “we will not have one without the other,” and this is our assurance that we will share in His victory if we share in the passion (not A without B.)

Well, the topic of last week’s reflection was union, and this week’s topic is victory. Together, these complete the Pascha that Melitus of Sardis wrote of.

According to John E. Dister, S.J. (A New Introduction to the Spiritual Exercises, John E. Dister, ed., chapter 10, The Liturgical Press, 1993), “it [The paschal Mystery] means, again in the context of Paul’s mysticism, that Christ is laboring and suffering, and is humble and poor today, not just that he was so in His historical life two thousand years ago. But it also means that we share today in Jesus’ joy, and Glory, and consolation, and
that this is not just something that we wait for on that day when we shall share with Jesus His Glory with the Father.”

One of the great paradoxes of Christian theology is the concept of deferred glorification.

In an attempt to explain away the significance of the sufferings associated with poverty and marginalization for a variety of other reasons, faith traditions have traditionally focused on the rewards of the hereafter.

In the 60’s and 70’s, some theologians (primarily from South and Central America) like Gustavo Gutierrez (Peru), Jon Sabrino (El Salvador), and Juan Segundo (Uruguay) began to ask “what about the here?”

The “here”, they argued, surely matters as well as the “hereafter.”

In the spirit of their theology, a politico/religious movement based on social justice was given birth, and they began asking for radical reinterpretation of the scriptures from the perspective of the poor.

This disconnectedness between the “here” and the “hereafter” was viewed as systemic or institutionalized sin intended to exploit indigenous populations, and the effects of it were seen to be oppression and suppression of the poor.

Eventually, the movement morphed into theologies interpreted from the perspective of otherwise marginalized peoples: feminist movements, and gay and lesbian movements, and adopted the general cry for reinterpretation of scripture and reinvestigation of the institutions and hierarchies on which traditionally organized religions were based.

Elements of these liberation theology movements became closely aligned with Marxism and lost much of their import because of it, but their questions are enduring ones.

The timeless meaningfulness and contemporary relevance of the Paschal Mystery is exactly what Melito was on about in 170-190 A.D. He continued in “On the Pascha”,

“[The mystery of the Pascha] is old insofar as it concerns the law, but new insofar as it concerns the gospel; temporal insofar as it concerns the type, eternal because of grace; corruptible because of the sacrifice of the sheep, incorruptible because of the life of the Lord; mortal because of his burial in the earth, immortal because of his resurrection from the dead.”

The Gospel and its promises must live for today, and we must search for a way to live it now and make meaning from it today. It is not enough to push this life off into eternity simply to justify the status quo.

In the words of our guest preacher on last Sunday, we enter into the dark cave, not because we crave the darkness, but because we seek the light!
We “Let the darkness come upon us which shall be the darkness of God” because only there can we see our broken, nearly despairing of life itself, pathetic shadows on the wall.

But our interest is not with the shadow!

We see our shadow self only because the light enters with us. And instead of fleeing from it, we allow it to shine. It shines against us at first, so our shadow is cast more clearly, and finally it shines upon us, as we make our way into the light, out of the darkness, resurrected with Jesus, transfigured and transformed, on our new course in life.

St. John of the cross spoke of “la noche oscura del alma” – the dark night of the soul, during which hardships and difficulties are experienced while detaching from the world on our journey to union with God.

In “The Dark Night of the Soul”, as in the cave metaphor, we see again this metaphor of darkness.

On the soul’s journey to union with God, St. John describes the via negativa, the way of inner purgation by which we detach from the world in order to experience spiritual rebirth (resurrection):

To reach satisfaction in all
desire its possession in nothing.
To come to possession in all
desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all
desire to be nothing.
To come to the knowledge of all
desire the knowledge of nothing.
To come to the pleasure you have not
you must go by the way in which you enjoy not.
To come to the knowledge you have not
you must go by the way in which you know not.
To come to the possession you have not
you must go by the way in which you possess not.
To come by the what you are not
you must go by a way in which you are not.
When you turn toward something
you cease to cast yourself upon the all.
For to go from all to the all
you must deny yourself of all in all.
And when you come to the possession of the all
you must possess it without wanting anything.
Because if you desire to have something in all
your treasure in God is not purely your all.”
And listen to the hymn we sang last Wednesday, and again last Sunday (#70):

“Go to dark Gethsemane, Ye that feel the tempter’s power;  
Your Redeemer’s conflict see, Watch with him one bitter hour;  
Turn not from his griefs away, Learn of Jesus Christ to pray.”

I made a note to myself to mention this after last Wednesday (and, with permission, I took a hymnal home with me as a reminder), and so when it again came up on Sunday I was very pleased to have my reflections reinforced by our worship practices.

It is a bit like buying a new car. After getting it home, you start seeing them everywhere. I am seeing things I have probably seen a hundred times before, but in the context of our reflections it feels like I’m seeing them for the first time.

For example, how about the hymn from the week before last Sunday (#430):

“Lead kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom, Lead Thou me on;  
The night is dark, and I am far from home; Lead Thou me on.”

This hymn is right on message, or perhaps we should conclude rather, that we are right on message. As the kids say, “whatever.”

Dante referred to the “fire that refines them – nel foco che gli affina,” and Eliot talked of being saved by pyre or pyre, the funeral pyre or the Pentecostal flame.

The roots of our own Anglo-Catholic tradition, the Oxford movement, intentionally “stressed the importance of an integrated spirituality of body, heart, and mind.” (Philip Sheldrake in “A Brief History of Spirituality.”) Sheldrake continued, “[there was an emphasis] on inner transformation, and on the potential union with God in Christ.”

It seems clear from so many sources that the journey to Easter Sunday takes us right over Calvary, there is no other way. Save on top of Calvary, we must say “you can’t get there from here!”

This is what we have been speaking about all along. This is what we have been leading up to!

These thoughts that are consistent and reinforcing are all around us. In a strange way they are coming together for what seems like the first time. And in a way that makes this Lent a very special season indeed.

We find that in our own faith tradition there has always been a strong coupling between union with Jesus and spiritual transformation.
“Living the passion” with our whole being - bodily, affectively, and intellectually - is a part of our heritage, and it is grounded in the hope of transformation, transfiguration, and union with God through the risen Christ.

There is a beautiful Celtic prayer which I take from David Adams in “The Rhythm of Life – Celtic Daily Prayer.” It says in part,

>Blessed are you, Christ, Light of the world;
You descend into our darkness,
To lift us into the realms of light.

Now we see also that Christ descends into our darkness, even as we let the darkness of God come upon us. Even as we are “crucified with Him”, He suffers our suffering. This is the complete (and the completed) Paschal Mystery.

We descend together, and arise together, transformed and transfigured together, and all to the glory of our Father.


Paul wrote to the Galatians: “I have become (and remain) crucified with Christ (Gal 2:19),” and to the Romans he used the expressions: “being buried with Him (Rom 6:4),” “having been crucified with Him,” and “in the hope that we will be made alive with Him.”

He speaks of Christians as “heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him, in order that we may be glorified together with Him.”

According to Stanley, Paul’s basic problem was that he had never known the earthly Jesus. In this respect he was like us, and he suffered for it.

Some of his Jewish-Christian rivals made this a reproach to his apostleship.

He needed (as do we) to find a way to live Jesus’ passion that was as nearly intimate and as personal as the original twelve had experienced.

Each week in the Eucharist we remember His passion, and now in our Lenten practices we do our best to live it. By our letting go we allow the Paschal mystery to unfold in us and in those around us.

In this we anticipate the victory of the Resurrection and prepare ourselves for Easter. Thanks to St. Paul and his dilemma, we discover through Grace a way to transition from a spiritual mode based on “following Jesus” to a new way of life and a new mode of spirituality based upon “abiding in Jesus.”
We beg for this Grace in our communion prayers when we ask “that we may abide in Him, and He in us.”

We ask for this grace now – here, until we join Him in the full Glory of the Father in the hereafter.

We ask that, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.”