

“Ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.” (St. John 16.20)

What does it mean to be an exile? What does it mean to be in a foreign land away from our home? Millions of people in our world know how that feels – specifically as they run from war and violence, seeking shelter as refugees, or resettled as evacuees. I would dare say that most, if not all of us, have the privilege that we are not exiles in a worldly sense. We have not been forced out of our homelands, we have not ran away in order to protect our life – so we have the privilege to not truly understand how it feels to be in this situation. But in our Epistle today, St. Peter addresses all Christians (all who believe in the resurrection and saving grace of Jesus Christ) as exiles.

At our Bible Study on Friday, it was intriguing to hear how different translations rendered these words: in the Prayer Book (King James), they are the words “strangers and pilgrims”. In the English Standard Version, “sojourners and exiles”. In the New International Version, “foreigners and exiles”. The RSV has “aliens”, and the Jerusalem Bible says, “strangers and nomads”. Do you see the thread? The Greek words here are *paroikos* and *parepidemos*, roughly meaning “stranger” and “temporary resident”, respectively, but we can see the range of translation they have gotten. The point: for St. Peter, these Christians he was addressing were temporary visitors, aliens, travellers, pilgrims, and exiles. They didn’t belong where they were, yet they were there, with the sense that they’d be going back eventually.

Now, while we don’t have the worldly experience of being refugees or exiles, what about the feeling of being *spiritual* exiles? Do we feel as though we belong in this world? Have you ever gotten the sense that you’re the only one among your friends who is a Christian? Do you ever feel as though the Church is in the minority in our world? Then there you go, I think you know the feeling of what St. Peter is calling an exile.

The young church that St. Peter was talking to knew what that felt like, too. It was small, it was brand new. There had barely been any time between the Resurrection and this new religion. Who was there to learn from? Who could be their example? The pressures of the Roman state religion and the cultus of the emperor were all around them. Being a Christian must have felt, at times, to be very isolating.

So, with this in mind, St. Peter addressed this young church and exhorted them how they were to survive in these unsettling surroundings: be good citizens, honour the laws and customs of the place where you are even if that is not your home, but never forget the place of God. Submit to the institutions of the world but retain your place in God’s kingdom – for there will you find your freedom. And this freedom, use it not for maliciousness, but to glorify God through what you do. For freedom itself, says St. Paul, is to be freed from the bondage of sin and choose to glorify and honour God (Gal. 5.13-14). If the Christians are merely sojourners, travellers, pilgrims, or exiles in this world, then we are to live in the belief that we will be returning to our homeland in the presence of God.

Our Gospel for today is from John chapter 16 – as will be the next two Sundays. This chapter is a continuation of the discourse Jesus has with his disciples at the Last Supper, and today we read “a little while and ye shall not see me; and again a little while and ye shall see me” and “ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.” Overtly, Jesus is telling his disciples about the next few days to come: repeating that he was to die and rise again, though other parts of this longer discourse tell us the disciples still didn’t understand what was to happen. For us, it makes total sense to hear this. For we know the story: we know that he died and rose again. But the disciples didn’t yet, at least not *really*.

It might seem a bit odd for us to be reading this passage *after* Easter. It might seem more appropriate to be read in the lead-up to Good Friday as we prepare to commemorate his death. However, Jesus' words stretch far beyond that upper room in Jerusalem, and even span further than those next few days. The message from Jesus about sorrow and joy is equally as applicable to all Christians who for centuries have hoped to see Jesus return to earth. For our true heavenly homeland to be established here in the earthly domain.

In our world of exile, in our sojourning, we perhaps feel as though we are in this place of sorrow with the disciples – waiting. The world around us can seem to be lacking the presence of our Lord, and we might even have some doubts about why we bother to keep going. But our sorrow is turned into joy when we recall that Jesus was risen from the dead. Our sorrow turns into joy when we encounter the presence of our Lord in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood at the Holy Eucharist. Our sorrow turns into joy when we remember that Jesus *is* alive and sits at the right hand of God in heaven. Seated upon his throne of glory, the joy of his presence never truly leaves us – and the gift of the Holy Spirit ensures that we are never truly without him.

So, in this sense, it is a truly Easter message: the joy of the resurrection that outlasts our fears, and outlasts our doubts. It is the joy of new life born out of a place of pain and hardship, and the joy of the perseverance of God's promises made to his creation.

The story in our Old Testament Lesson today is an example of this teaching. Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Israel, was sold into slavery by his brothers (who initially planned to kill him). He was taken into Egypt and served a captain of the guard. He was eventually cast into jail, but never gave up trusting in the God of his ancestors. He was provided interpretations to dreams and gained so much trust with the Egyptians that the Pharaoh put him in charge of the whole country's business. In our lesson today, we see Joseph revealing himself to his brothers for the first time since all of this transpired. His brothers were desperate for food because of a famine, though did not recognize their brother. He was as good as dead to them. But despite the evil his brothers had done against him, Joseph unreservedly forgave them for he knew that all that happened was by the hand of God. They were unwitting pawns in God's plan for his peoples' survival. Though Joseph was an exile of his family in Egypt, his remembrance and use of the gifts that God gave him allowed him to be a shining light in their midst. To his brothers and his father, Joseph was alive again when assumed he was dead.

While we may be merely sojourners or temporary residents in this world, and while our citizenship truly rests in the kingdom of God, we still must exist and function in this world. And to do so well is to honour God's commandments and show forth his grace in our actions. For our God-given freedom does not mean we are free to waste away to the passions of the world, but we are free to be servants of God and to function in the world as God has ordained us to do. And in doing so, by sharing God's grace, we fulfill the two great commandments of loving God, and loving our neighbours as ourselves.

As we continue to proceed together in this Easter season, may we remember God in all that we do, say, and think. May our interactions with each other show forth his love, and may we build his kingdom here on earth through our actions and words. And we pray that the joy of the resurrection fills our hearts to commit ourselves to his service.

And now...