

Triumph and Tribulation

In the name of our Good Shepherd from whose mighty hands no one can snatch us, dear friends in Christ: In today's first reading from the Revelation of St. John, the beloved Apostle tells us of his glorious vision of a vast multitude of white robed saints standing around the throne of God and of the Lamb. They are countless in number and they come from every tribe, nation, and race of men. They wave palm branches celebrating their victory and they shout in triumph declaring not the work and accomplishments of their own hands, but of him who achieved salvation for them and gave it to them freely: God the Father who sits on the throne and the Son whom he sent to give his life a ransom for many.

The awesome spectacle renders John speechless, and so one of the elders leans over and asks him the question which is forefront in his mind: "Who are these clothed in white, and from where have they come?" John responds with "Sir, you know." It's his way of saying, "I was hoping you'd tell me." The wise elder informs him, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." He goes on to explain how they will no more hunger or thirst or be afflicted by the elements, and how God will wipe away all their tears.

So what John is seeing is a glimpse of the finish line of our faith. It's the joyful assembly that we too will join one day – indeed, because John is looking into the future, he sees us already in that sea of exultant faces. We are there standing with all the blessed who rest from their labors and whose troubles are at an end. And it's important that we through the eyes of John see ourselves there. Why? Because contrary to what so many people think, the Book of Revelation was written to give God's people comfort and assurance. Now, to be sure, it contains many frightening images. If you've ever read through it, you know that it describes wars and plagues and famines and terrible suffering as God's judgments are unleashed on the unbelieving world. And sadly, many preachers and Bible teachers who should know better use these disturbing passages to terrify the flocks they've been called to serve – as if they could scare people into greater faithfulness. But when they do, they're missing the main point. And that is this: we know how the story ends. Yes, in this world we will know trouble and hardship. Jesus himself said as much to his disciples. And then he told them, "But don't be afraid: I've overcome the world." So let it do its worse. Let Satan rage. Let earthly authorities and powers persecute you. Be hated and despised for the name of Jesus. Let sin and its evil consequences run their course. Let the judgments of the Lord fall. It's okay. Have no fear. In the end, you win. The victory is won. Your triumph in Christ has already been achieved.

And of course to say that the white robed saints came out of the great tribulation, and that they will no longer suffer from hunger, and thirst, and heat, and what not, tells us that they were well acquainted with these things in their lives on Earth. Here they knew pain and suffering and loss. All people do to some extent; but these were afflicted specifically on account of their Christian faith. Each one's white robe is the righteousness of Jesus Christ which is imputed to them by faith in the sacrifice he made for sin. They are there because they believed in the blood of the Lamb that washed away their sins. But their white robes which shine so brightly there in glory also marked them as targets for their enemies in this world. That's why they experienced great tribulation.

Perhaps no one knew this better than St. Paul. You may recall that one of last week's lessons was the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus, how he was going there to

round up Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains, and how Jesus intercepted him on the way, blinding him and telling him to wait for instructions about what to do. After letting Paul stew for three days in fear and darkness, the Lord sent a believer named Ananias to him to restore his sight, to baptize him, and to instruct him in the Christian faith. Ananias wasn't so sure. He knew that Paul was a dangerous enemy. But Jesus told Ananias, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

And suffer he did. His former allies, the Jews who were trying to stamp out Christianity, hated him because he switched sides and was now eloquently defending the cause of Jesus. They were planning to murder him. Meanwhile, the Christians in Jerusalem pretty much gave Paul the cold shoulder. They were happy that he wasn't persecuting them anymore; but the suffering he had afflicted upon them was too recent. Their wounds from his zealous persecution still hurt. They weren't sure they could trust him. So the Apostles thought it best to send him away. And that must have hurt him.

Little did he know at the time, it was for the best. It forced him out into the world. It made him rub shoulders with Gentiles. And it gave him time to study the Scriptures and come to see the full extent of God's mercy in Christ. Paul was among the first to see that Jesus came to save all people – not just Jews. He saw clearly how that in Jesus, Jew and Gentile were now equals. We take it for granted; but back then it was a major breakthrough. And thus Paul became an evangelist and missionary, preaching the truth of the Gospel across Asia Minor and into Greece. And wherever he went, he met opposition. Unbelieving Jews hated him because – well, I've already told you why they hated him. But Paul's teaching that now Jew and Gentile were the same drove them completely nuts. In their outrage they'd riot and cause public disturbances that attracted the attention of the civil authorities, who in turn would arrest and beat Paul for being a trouble maker and a disturber of the peace. This happened in several places. In other places angry mobs stoned him and left him for dead. In Ephesus, it was the silver smiths who started a riot. They were upset because so many people were converting to Christianity that their business of selling little idols of the goddess Diana was drying up. They tried to tear Paul limb from limb.

So he faced repeated threats and dangers from Jews, from pagans, and from civil authorities. He did indeed suffer much. And in today's reading from Acts, we hear about him preparing to face yet more hardships. He's nearing the end of what was his third mission journey. According to the Lord's direction, after over three years in the mission field he's preparing to return to Jerusalem. But before he goes, he summons the pastors of the many churches that have – due largely to his ministry – sprung up in and around Ephesus. He gathers these men for some last minute instruction and a final farewell. And without any sense of pride or self-glorification he holds himself up as an example to them. He reminds them of how he suffered and put his life on the line to proclaim Christ among them, and how he is even now going to Jerusalem where the Spirit has told him that he will face imprisonment and affliction for the sake of the Gospel. He says this as a way of informing them that now it's your turn. I'm handing the ball off to you. As you have seen me face affliction to get the saving Word of Christ out there, from here on so will you.

Now, they know full well the dangers that their churches face from external enemies. They know firsthand what attacks the Jews and pagans have launched against them. By this point in history, they've begun to experience government sponsored persecution. What's interesting to me is that in this discourse Paul warns them even more about the dangers that will come from within the church. He says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he

obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away disciples after themselves.” He’s talking about people who teach and spread false doctrines. You see, Satan is a clever foe. What he can’t do one way, he accomplishes in another. From the outside he uses brute force and threats of violence to destroy the church. And from the inside he seeks to destroy it with teachings that are poison to the soul.

Thus the church of all ages has faced great tribulation. What amazes me is how, when it happens in our day, people act so shocked and surprised. Now, it’s true that here in this country we don’t face a lot of overt persecution – unlike so many of our fellow believers who live in countries dominated by Muslims. Here we Christians are regarded by the society at large as silly and superstitious, and so we face some insults now and then. In other nations Christians are being imprisoned, robbed, and killed for their faith. But no, here among us Satan does his work against the church primarily through false teachings – the most insidious of which is that Christian truth is negotiable and that adhering to true doctrine really does not matter. The satanic lie tells us that it’s better to compromise than to stand for what’s right, that conflict must be avoided at all costs, and that the truth isn’t worth fighting for – much less dying for. I wonder what Paul would have to say about that: Paul and the other Apostles who faced death by sword and flame and cross because of the truth they confessed.

You see, they understood that the truth is worth fighting for. It’s worth dying for; because the truth of Christ gives life eternal. That’s what Paul and the Apostles confessed with their lives and with their deaths. The problem is that we are afraid to face tribulation. And that’s because we’re looking only at the present and not at the glorious goal. We need to change our focus. With St. John, we need to look ahead to the goal that comes after our time of tribulation. We need to stand fast on the Word of truth that we have received from Paul and the Apostles not fearing what the world will do or how it may cause conflict within the church. It’s a given: if you are rightly confessing Christ and him crucified, you will experience tribulation. But that’s okay, for we’ve been given the means to endure. We can stand even now in the white robes of Christ’s righteousness that were given in our Baptisms and which are washed again every time we confess our sins. We can gather around the Table the Lord has prepared for us in the sight of our enemies in this world – the Table where we receive his body and blood for the strengthening of our faith and the forgiveness of our sins. We can call upon the Lord who answers us in our distress. We can strengthen and encourage each other with biblical counsel and with hymns, and psalms, and spiritual songs. And we can, with the eyes of faith, look ahead and see ourselves in the vast multitude of saints gathered around the throne of God and of the Lamb – the Lamb who is our Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for us and who claimed it again to lead us though the valley of the shadow of death into the light of the endless day. Therefore we have nothing to fear. After tribulation comes our triumph, even as it did for Jesus our Savior. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!