

Lord, To Whom Shall We Go?

Two Thousand Years ago Jesus astonished His Disciples when after His burial He rose from the dead and appeared to them in the closed and locked upper room.

A week later He again appeared to them, this time with Thomas present who disbelieved the witness of his fellow Apostles that Jesus had risen from the dead. Undaunted by their witness he would not believe their word until he saw in Jesus' hands the print of the nails and put his finger in the mark of the nails. Now with great patience Jesus allows Thomas time to grasp the utter truth of His Resurrection by telling Thomas to see His hands and place his hand on His side. Overcome with chagrin Thomas exclaims: "My Lord and My God!" Jesus patiently says to him, "Thomas, you have believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Two thousand years later we are the descendants and beneficiaries of the Apostles witness and though we have not seen the Risen Lord, yet we believe. But, do we?

Do we allow the tares of this life to distract us from believing the Truth? In every generation there are those who allow the tares growing along side the sowed seeds of the Word to take over our understanding, including even those who saw the Risen Lord.

When they [the Disciples] saw Him [on the mountain in Galilee], they worshiped Him; but some doubted. *Matt 28:17*

Given our limited human understanding of the divine, it is easy to do ignore the mystery of Christ's Resurrection, and relying exclusively on our human senses and minds we are incapable of grasping the fact of someone rising from the dead. We are incredulous, and mistrust. We doubt like Thomas.

Those of us who believe the witness of the Apostles are reminded in one of the petitions of Vespers when we pray to the God of our Fathers, acknowledging that what our fathers and mothers, our grandfathers and grandmothers, our great grandfathers and great grandmothers and all our forefathers and foremothers believed was what got them through their hardships, it is what will bring us through ours. They knew something important for their lives and we do right when we acknowledge that their witness over two thousand years is the same as ours. The same God they believed we believe. We honor them by accepting this reality and we try to pass on this legacy to our children and grandchildren. That is how the Body of Christ – the Church – has continued to exist even to this day.

We are the inheritance of our forefathers and foremothers. Indeed, we are God's inheritance that we acknowledge after receiving communion when the priest declares: "O God save thy people and bless thine inheritance!" We are that inheritance. Remarkable! We are the living Body of Christ – we are His church that the gates of Hell will not prevail against.

Why do we believe the witness of the Apostles? Why should we? Where else can we go for the truth of this world? As Peter finally acknowledged to Jesus after Jesus asked if he was going to join the others of His followers who left Him: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." [Jn 6:68] Other paths lead to dead ends and destruction. At some point in our lives we recognize that there really is only one reality. The reality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit!

God created us to be in fellowship with Him, but when we disobeyed He banished us from Paradise into this world where pain and travail persist and prevail. Yet, He did not abandon us. He sent prophets to remind us of His love and concern, and then in the fullness of time He sent His only begotten Son. Think of it! Who are we that God should be concerned about us? David received an insight into God's love for us and remarked:

When I consider Your heavens,
and the work of Your fingers,
The moon and the stars, which
You have ordained,
What is man that You are mindful of him?

...

For You have made him a little
lower than the angels,
And You have crowned him
with glory and honor. *Ps 8:3-5*

David beheld the universe from a stationary earth. We now know that the earth moves. We live on this relatively small planet spinning once a day and orbiting the Sun once a year in the vastness of space where millions of galaxies exist. For some this reality shows the utter futility of our existence so that they take a dissolute view of life and wallow in destructive behavior.

For us believers it shows the tremendous love God has for us. In all the vastness of space He sent His Son to dwell among us. We are not insignificant in His eyes. He is mindful of us and continues to want fellowship with us, and awaits our return to Him to Paradise. Did not Jesus promise the righteous thief at his confession, "Today you will be with Me in Paradise?" What joy!

Yes, in this life we will suffer. That is our current condition. But, it is not our permanent condition. We are sojourners here. Our citizenship is in the Kingdom with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When we suffer we ask God for relief. We ask to be cured, do we not? And, sometimes we are. But, at other times we are not. Yet, God has not abandoned us. There is, in the Orthodox understanding, a distinction made between curing and healing. Curing is to recover completely from a disability or a sickness, healing is to be reconciled to God. When Paul asked God three times to take away the thorn from his side, the Lord responded: No! God did not cure Paul of his misfortune. Rather, He told him that His strength is made powerful in weakness. He healed Paul, He did not cure him.

What does this mean? He strengthened Paul to endure his pain. Paul was reconciled with God who had lifted him up to the third heaven to see and to hear things that Paul says he cannot utter. Yet, God did not take away – that is cure him – of his thorn.

If we have eyes to see and ears to hear we understand God's place in our lives, how He answers our prayers, how He smooths the path we are on, and how He rescues us. He awaits our return to Him and like Lazarus He will send angels to carry us to the bosom of Abraham.

With these promises and with our experiences with Him we know joy. There is no reason for us to be despondent. Whatever trials we face, we have Christ on our side to endure them. With God in our hearts we can smile in the face of adversity. In this Pentecostal period – this joyous time we celebrate each year after Christ's Resurrection – let us recall all that God has done for us, and look forward to joining Him in Paradise when our earthly life comes to an end.

Christ is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!

Christ is Risen! Truly, He is Risen!