

Third Sunday after Easter 2020

The Gospel of this Sunday is clearly about Christ preparing his disciples for his death and resurrection. "*A little while, and now you shall not see me: and again a little while, and you shall see me*". Like many sayings of Our Lord and generally in the Scriptures, these words have more than one meaning, more than his death and resurrection. They also tell us that, forty days after his resurrection, he would ascend to God the Father. Again he would disappear and leave his disciples with only their memories and their faith.

After another ten days, the Holy Spirit would come and give those who received the Holy Spirit another and more spiritual understanding of Christ and his mission. There is a third panel of the triptych, the Parousia, the second Coming at the end of this world. Then he would be seen again.

The Church put this Gospel into this stage of Eastertide to mark the newly-baptised being given their instructions as new Christians. They were being sent out to struggles, difficulties and persecution. Christ's words about departing and coming back refer to the way we would live this departure and happy reunion. Christians receive the Sacraments and experience Christ's presence in prayer. However, Christ seems to go away and leave us in a *dark night of the soul*. This is a time when we feel abandoned by God and left alone. This week, I prepared an article for my blog, which I abandoned, because it was too radical. I advanced the opinion that is sometimes encountered that Christianity is being "cleansed" by atheists and the plague now scourging the world speaks more of God's absence than any notion of consolation or miracle. I approach the *Christianity without religion* of Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he contemplated a Christianity collaborating with the evil of Nazism.

Christ reassures us that he will return, and that his promises are not broken.

Verily, verily, I say unto you, That ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy.

This joy cannot be taken from us, even in the midst of the Night. I give you a couple of quotes from Novalis' *Hymnen an die Nacht*.

Once when I was shedding bitter tears, when, dissolved in pain, my hope was melting away, and I stood alone by the barren mound which in its narrow dark bosom hid the vanished form of my life—lonely as never yet was lonely man, driven by anxiety unspeakable—powerless, and no longer anything but a conscious misery. —As there I looked about me for help, unable to go on or to turn back, and clung to the fleeting, extinguished life with an endless longing:—then, out of the blue distances—from the hills of my ancient bliss, came a shiver of twilight—and at once snapt the bond of birth—the chains of the Light. Away fled the glory of the world, and with it my mourning—the sadness flowed together into a new, unfathomable world—Thou, Night-inspiration, heavenly Slumber, didst come upon me—the region gently upheaved itself; over it hovered my unbound, newborn spirit. The mound became a cloud of dust—and through the cloud I saw the glorified face of my beloved. In her eyes eternity reposed—I laid hold of her hands, and the tears became a sparkling bond that could not be broken. Into the distance swept by, like a tempest, thousands of years. On her neck I welcomed the new life with ecstatic tears. It was the first, the only dream—and just since then I have held fast an eternal, unchangeable faith in the heaven of the Night, and its Light, the Beloved.

No longer was the Light the abode of the gods, and the heavenly token of their presence—they drew over themselves the veil of the Night. The Night became the mighty womb of revelations—into it the gods went back—and fell asleep, to go abroad in new and more glorious shapes over the transfigured world.

Like the Song of Solomon, the beloved is portrayed as an image of the eternal marriage of the Lamb. Our human experience shows an analogy between romantic love of another human being and our longing for Christ.

There is talk of an Age of the Holy Spirit, not a new religion or distinct from Christianity, but the fulfilment of Christianity – in exactly the same way as the disciples waited for the day of Pentecost. We wait, but we are also responsible for living this long night until the light shall appear. It is our desire and hope that, even before the Parousia, that a great change will come over our world and our human consciousness. In such a vision, our freedom will be revealed to us. We will not be goaded by authority or reward. The legalistic conception of Christianity and of eternal punishment will finally disappear. We will be saved by our love and longing for the light.

Before reaching this light, we have to pass through darkness and all that materialistic man can do to nature, bringing forth diseases and new plagues. Our mind is manipulated and our longing for truth is confounded by deceit and lies. The present pandemic indicates the same lack of faith in human as wars and revolutions did to our forebears. We feel that the Creator withdrew from creation – or never existed, leaving us to our own meaningfulness. We must follow the Cross and Resurrection of Christ.

The Night is a time when God is hidden and the well-springs of Revelation are closed, but paradoxically the very condition for receiving the Light. Christianity is being purified in the crucible as happened in times of war and persecution. It also scours us in times of epidemic and plague. We may yet live through many things that happened in the twentieth century: extreme nationalism, fascism, totalitarianism, evil and death. External religion is buckling under the present ban of gatherings of people in public places – including churches. Something new and better is on the horizon. However, the promised joy is not immediate, and may not be for our lifetime.

I do believe that the seeds of the new renaissance are mixed in with the things that bring darkness, like shallowness of culture and materialism. We wait, but we must also build the new world by our creativeness. *And again a little while, and you shall see me...*