

The Perfection of All Things Is At Hand

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

One of the great blessings of the liturgical calendar is that the cycles of readings encourage us to become familiar with the Scriptures through repetition; and, by extension, to become familiar with the great events in the life of Christ and the Church that are central to our faith. Our focus is constantly directed to the doctrines that the Creed so simply and confidently proclaims. We are enabled to inhabit the passages that make up the lectionary, finding new depths in texts that we have heard many times.

Of course, this blessing can also be a temptation. We are all familiar with the expression “familiarity breeds contempt.” While I certainly don’t think that any of you hold the mysteries of the faith in derision, I think it is inescapably true that our familiarity with the facts of redemption history can keep us from grasping their astonishing character. The resurrection and ascension of Christ, and the descent of the Holy Spirit, are end-times events. They mark the end of the old creation, corrupted by sin and bound by death, and the beginning of the new world that God is making. We are to see these events as the beginnings of an invasion, an irruption of eternity into the lives of men. The festivals of Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost

proclaim to us precisely that message with which Peter begins our reading: “The end of all things is near.”

“The end of all things” has a somewhat negative connotation in our culture, but its connotation in the Greek is quite the opposite. When Peter speaks of the “end of all things,” the word that he uses for “end” is the Greek word *telos*. The word most nearly means “perfection” or “completion”. It is closely related to that word which Jesus cried out as He gave up His spirit: “*Tetelestai! It is finished!*”

The end of all things began in the death of Jesus Christ, and will be complete at His second coming. At that time He will order all things according to the Father’s will, making everything what it ought to be and putting all things and people where they belong. For the believer, the coming of Christ will mean salvation. When I say “salvation,” understand that I’m not talking about justification – that is, your right relationship with the Father through faith in Jesus. That is an accomplished fact. By “salvation” I mean, here, the whole process through which God takes sinful people and re-makes them in His image. On the Last Day, your salvation will be complete. The Holy Spirit will raise you from the dead and make you perfect, so that you will be like Christ, and will serve Him in His Kingdom in blessedness and righteousness. This is the *telos*, the goal that God has been working for since the Fall of our first parents: that man would be forgiven his sins, restored to

communion with God, made partakers of eternal life, and brought to maturity and perfection in His image.

Because of the nearness of this end, and the blessed hope that you have of eternal life, Peter gives us instructions concerning how you and I are to live. We are exhorted to prayer: “be of sound mind and temperate unto prayers.” In encouraging us to a sound mind and temperance, Peter echoes the words of Christ in the Gospel: “Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.” Our sinful flesh loves ease and comfort, and wants to be left alone to attend to the riches, business, concerns, anxieties, and joys of this life. This is especially the case in a country like ours – wealthy, optimistic, powerful – and an age like ours, whose prevailing spirit is materialistic and pleasure-seeking. But the temptation to give one’s heart to the world can take other forms as well. Pleasure-seeking is not the only thing that can choke out our faith; so can the excessive desire for money, security, a good reputation, or success in business. Of course, money, security, and a good reputation are not evil in themselves. They become evil when we idolize them, seeking them first and the Kingdom of God second.

Peter’s exhortation to prayer is a call to forsake, to repent of, our idolatrous concern for the cares of the world. The world, after all, is passing away. The cares

which seem so pressing today will vanish tomorrow. The end of all things is near.

We should turn our attention instead to the immeasurably great mercies that God has promised us, and to the deeds that He has done for our eternal happiness.

Having repented of our sinful attachment to this life, and having been forgiven through the blood of Christ, we are to devote ourselves to prayer. On the one hand, this refers to the petitions of the Church, shaped by God's Word and offered to God in response to His mercies, as Pastor Morehouse preached to us on Rogate Sunday. We are not to let the cares of this life distract us or keep us from praying with our brothers and sisters in Christ whenever we are able. Peter's exhortation also applies to the prayers that we pray individually, which are formed by the Church's teaching and her collective life of prayer. The nearness of the end gives particular urgency to our prayers, for the Scriptures say that in the last days, the love of many will grow cold, and many will fall away from the faith to pursue false teachers. We must continually ask God to grant us His grace, so that through His Holy Spirit we may continue to repent of our sins, receive forgiveness through Christ, and persevere in the orthodox faith through His almighty power.

The promised coming of Christ also has implications for our conduct towards our neighbors – in particular, for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Peter says in verse 8: "Above all, having a fervent love for one another." Peter is not exhorting us to try to produce a love that we lack. His words, "having a fervent

love for one another,” indicate that we already love each other. This is a gift to us from the Holy Spirit, who binds the Church together in love. Peter’s aim is to direct the exercise of the love we have been given. He names three particular offices which love ought to fulfill among Christians:

1. First, love “covers over a multitude of sins.” God’s eternal love for us moved Him to become man and sacrifice Himself, so that our sins might be covered with His blood. Because of this prior mercy, we also are to cover the sins of others. This does not mean that we are to pretend that others have no sin, or to confirm them in their sinful practices with excuses. Rather, our passage speaks of showing others the strong, godly love of the Lord Jesus Christ, in forgiving them the sins that they commit against us. We are, furthermore, to rebuke and correct one another when appropriate, but in such a way that we do not unnecessarily expose one another’s faults, or fall into the sin of gossip. And we are to lift one another up in prayer, interceding for our brethren and asking for God’s mercy in leading them to repentance and forgiveness.
2. Second, we are to be hospitable to one another without grumbling. Christ has been moving this congregation to many good works in this respect. I will not name names, but many people, myself included, have benefited from the kindness and generosity of members here who have opened

their homes and shared their goods with those who needed them. Your willingness to take care of your brothers and sisters has been a light and comfort to many people. We all should praise God for the work that He has done among us in this way, and ask Him to move us to still greater acts of loving hospitality.

3. Third, we are to help one another with the gifts of grace that God has given us. Here again, our love comes in response to the love that God first shows us. Every talent or skill that we have, we have from God as a pure gift of grace. He has not given our talents so that we can keep them to ourselves, but He wills that we use them to expand His Kingdom and to better the lives of others. Peter in our text mentions two specific gifts that we ought to exercise in this way: speaking and serving. When we speak, we ought to do so as “the oracles of God”. That is, we should speak according to God’s Word and, when we have opportunity, proclaim the Gospel. To encourage us in this work, we have God’s promise that He will use His Word to build up His Kingdom: “My word that goes out from my mouth . . . shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Likewise, whenever we serve others, we should do so from the strength that God supplies. When we do good to others we are God’s

instruments to bring them His gifts. God is serving them through us, whether our service takes place at work, in our homes, in this congregation, or in any other circumstance.

To summarize what has been said thus far: Because the completion of all things is

drawing near, we are to repent of our sinful love for this world, continually offer prayers to God, and exercise charity toward one another through the Holy Spirit.

We must understand that this is not only an exhortation to virtue. The new life that we have as believers is itself a sign that the end of all things is at hand. When the Holy Spirit moves you to perform the good works that Peter describes, He is giving you a foretaste of life in the Kingdom of God. In the new creation, you will speak with God face-to-face, you will love Him above all things, you will be filled with pure charity for all men. Your prayers, worship, and good works in this life are the imperfect beginnings of what you will experience perfectly in eternity. God has made you new creatures in Christ, and the new obedience which He is creating in you will be perfected on the Last Day. Sanctification is the beginning of glorification.

Peter goes on to speak of what you should expect from the world as a result of your faith and life: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” As you

wait expectantly for Christ's coming, the world will persecute you. This persecution is not strange, as we heard in our Gospel reading for today, and in the Gospel reading from Cantate Sunday, just a few weeks ago. The world hated Christ, His teaching, His life. As we devote ourselves to His teaching, and as we attempt, however weakly, to follow the example of His life, the world will hate us too. This has been a consistent theme for these last weeks of Easter, as we anticipate the coming of the Holy Spirit who empowers the Church to fulfill Christ's commission. In our day, the world hates us especially for preaching that the Triune God is the only God, and that Christ crucified is the only source of salvation. They also hate us for teaching true love for others: a love that forgives sin, but does not excuse it.

Insofar as you suffer for the name of Christ, be glad, for such suffering is a participation in Christ's own suffering. Jesus has given you the honor of sharing His sufferings, as you love your enemies and proclaim the Gospel to them even when they seek to destroy you. To comfort you in the midst of trials, Christ gives you a promise through His apostle: you who are insulted for His sake have the Spirit of glory and of God resting upon you, and you will rejoice when the Lord comes again. The same Spirit who gives you strength to bear witness to Christ, and who is present with you when you suffer for His name's sake, will also raise you

from the dead on the Last Day, and will transform your lowly bodies to be like Christ's glorious body.

Here we see again the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is molding and shaping you so that you grow more and more into the image of Christ, so that your lives are conformed to the pattern of His life. Just as Christ first suffered persecution and death, and through these came into His glory, so also you will reach the Kingdom of God through many sufferings. Because you are in Christ by faith, you share in everything that is His: His righteousness, His Word, His body and blood, His sanctification, His sufferings, His works, and, finally, His eternal life. By God's grace, you will attain to the end which God has ordained for you: to share the life of Christ.

Upheld by this hope, let us devote ourselves to the Word of God, to the prayers, and to the love of our brethren, knowing that we who share Jesus' sufferings and death will also share in His resurrection.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting.

Amen.