

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

If you were to enter the study of fifty clergy and perused their libraries, especially the volumes on Gospels, you would likely find that the commentaries on the Gospel of John far outnumber any others. It is perhaps because John is much beloved and spiritually takes us to places we do not experience in the Synoptics. After all it does appear over and over again during this season of Easter. But, it may also be that pastors and priests feel the need, as likely you do, for help in unwrapping the constant twists and turns, mysterious images, and the striking language that simply overrun the pages of this book. Consider just this day the contrasts and ironies in a few verses: grief and joy, suffering and peace, seeing and not seeing, hidden and open speech; the list is expansive. And then there is this rather outlandish claim that if we ask anything of the Father in Jesus' name it will be given. It is almost as if John is boggling our intellect in order that we might listen differently; with the ear of our souls. This reading is meant to be an 'insiders' glimpse into the relationship between Jesus and his disciples (which also means us). It is as if a hidden camera or microphone has been set in place and brings us to a private time and conversation. And like all deeply personal conversations this occurs in a context. This flashback occurs in the full bloom of the Easter. You know how this works. It is a technique used in TV and movies all the time, but we have them as well. Have you ever had an experience; an event; a moment in your life that though long past still echoes in your mind, soul, and heart and carries real power even NOW? Perhaps it is a smell or a taste or a song which transports you to the birth of a child, a marriage, a relationship or even a tragedy, and a momentary return to these still impact us in the present and even help make sense of why we think and act as we do. We gain an insight into NOW because of what happened THEN or is promised for the future.

Pearl Hull, the chief figure in Anne Tyler's novel, Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, is old, blind, and dying. Her son, Ezra, reads to her each day from her diary. Most sections are ordinary. Just before her death he reads, "Early this morning I went out behind the house to weep. Was kneeling in the dirt by the stable with my pinafore a mess and perspiration running down my back... Reached for the trowel and all at once thought, , Why I believe at just this moment I am absolutely happy...Piano scales were floating out of the window from the Bedloe girl next door, and a fly buzzed in the grass, and I saw that I was kneeling on such a beautiful, green, little planet. I don't care what else may come about, I have had this moment and it belongs to me." The entry ends and Pearl says, Thank you, Ezra. There's no need to read anymore." St. John brings us from the Resurrection reflexively back to the days beforehand in order to pull all of life's concerns, questions, and struggles into the picture. He wants us to know in the deepest places, that what we live with in this difficult world is measured in light of God's ultimate victory. The Christian life is lived in the ebb and flow between these. You see we stand alongside the disciples juggling the tensions we live with every day, and like them we wonder to make of this life; what faith and prayer have to do with. (The writing of this homily occurred between a visit with my mother who is grappling with living alone with increasing memory loss and seeing a granddaughter in the hospital with substantial life challenges. "In this world you have tribulation (suffering), but take heart, I have overcome the world". Now there is a set of opposites!!)

Today on the church calendar we have what has historically been known as Rogation Sunday. Think of it as a kind of Anglican 'Earth Day'. The name derives from the Latin, Rogare, meaning 'to ask'. It goes back to at least 450 A.D. and originated in Britain. People would have their priest "beat the bounds", i.e. bless the land, streams and rivers, woodlands and fields; the places of life hoping for a productive year and recognizing that 'this space', i.e. this unique plot had special meaning. It was not just geographic but the place where they would live out their connection with creation and the creator. More than anything else it was a day for praying; of asking to be blessed by God's presence. "If you ask anything of the Father in my name..."

What does asking by way of prayer suggest to you? We ask because we want, and sometimes, perhaps often, we confuse want with essential need. That is, our asking has a sort of self-serving quality. I learned this at the ripe age of 13 when rather than studying, having heard my father preach on this text, I decided that praying would be much easier than studying and asked to pass a math exam "in Jesus' Name". It didn't work!! Either this remarkable claim by Jesus was not true OR it was not being heard correctly. I think it is not a magical formula to fix all the ills of life. Rather sometimes we 'ask' because we are 'in want' which is different from wanting. It is to be in need and to recognize we do not have something essential and are missing it. And in an even deeper sense asking is the recognition of our being incomplete and seeking to be finished—made more whole and full even as the abrasiveness of life chips away at our resources. Jesus is not suggesting that prayer will provide 'things', but rather a new understanding of life where the struggles are placed in the perspective of God's victory. Praying reframes life.

"In this world you have (tribulation, suffering, anxiety)... Jesus is merely stating reality. When we look at the geopolitical context with North Korea or Iran we know the world is out of balance. Aging with ailments physical, cognitive, and relational along with the fear of being left alone is something we know viscerally, and it can cast dark shadows. Youth in our culture face a future far less secure than many of us faced. And in general there is today a fear of closeness, of others wanting too much and yet even with so much social media and activity we find isolation and people becoming lost. Does it not seem strange that we say to ourselves, 'this is the 21st Century. How can people destroy and act in such uncivilized ways'? Yet that very question encases the fallacy that human progress is merely a matter of more education and access to the world's goods. C.S Lewis, in Mere Christianity, wrote, "All that we call human history—money, poverty, war, prostitution, classes, empires—is a long terrible story of humanity trying to find something other than God which will make him happy".

There is however, the other piece of this taut strand of cloth; "But, take heart, I have overcome the world!" This spoken by one who was born into the same space we occupy; who was born and lived in relative poverty and obscurity among a people captive to a cruel political and economic power; a man who from the cross cries out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" from Ps. 22. This is from the One in whom God has acted in the midst of all that frightens us. Take Heart, he says, and obviously it is not simply stiffening our backbones, nor is it something we can do on our own. It is either an illusion or a promise.

In translating this text something surfaced that I had not noticed so much previously. It is one little word which is a conjunction—in Greek 'alla'; in English 'But'. It is a magnificent countering word. It points us beyond the immediate and apparent—Not simply this, BUT ALSO THIS. Have you considered how often in scripture that is spoken? You have heard from of old, hate your enemies, BUT I say...or from Isaiah, "Heaven and Earth will pass away, BUT, my word (that is

my divine activity (For the world) will not pass away, or in John, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that all who believe in him should not perish, BUT, have everlasting life”. God’s countering promise to the threats of loss, dissolution, and fear echo everywhere. When Jesus says in our pericope for the day, “in me you have peace”, it is predicated on the love God has for his people. Yes, you have loved me, yes, you have trusted me, and yes, you seek to keep my commandment to love one another, BUT it all rests on this: **As I have loved you.** It is in this relationship, intimate and unbreakable that we see how “the world” is overcome by peace.

There are 2 pieces of art to which I want to call your attention. The first you have undoubtedly seen. It is Da Vinci’s “Last Supper”, and is familiar. The other is the “Resurrection” segment of the Isenheim Altar by Matthias Gruenwald, which shows Jesus raised and the guards prone as dead men before him. There is an interesting artistic device that both painters used to create these masterpieces. If you draw the lines of perspective over these paintings they converge at one point; on Jesus. All the other figures, even though they are important to the message, are tertiary. It is as if the artists are telling us the secret of life in the midst of all other things, all other relationships, all other challenges (betray and death) is to be found in the one who promises that we can take heart for he has overcome all that can ultimately harm us. Amen+