

Holy Trinity Sunday

PARTURITION IS SUCH SWEET SORROW

John 16:12-15

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Analysis by Marcus Felde

John 16 gets short shrift in the Revised Common Lectionary. Only on this festival will we read from it in worship, and only four verses. So here is the whole chapter, itself only part of the Final Discourse (chapters 14-17), to help us better interpret the clipping.

[I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling. 2They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God. 3And they will do this because they have not known the Father or me. 4But I have said these things to you so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you about them.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. 5But now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ 6But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. 7Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. 8And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: 9about sin, because they do not believe in me; 10about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; 11about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.]

12I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. 14He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 15All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

[16A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me. 17Then some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying to us, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" 18They said, "What does he mean by this 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." 19Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, 'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'? 20Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. 21When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. 22So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. 23On that day you will ask nothing of me. Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. 24Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

25I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. 26On that day you will ask

in my name. I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; 27for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. 28I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.”

29His disciples said, “Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! 30Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.” 31Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? 32The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me. 33I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”]

DIAGNOSIS: Bad Cross

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Couldn't Bear (v. 12) the Thought*

Jesus looked at the disciples he was about to leave (in order to be crucified) and thought, “They’re not ready for this.” His grip on them, as their leader, had always been tenuous. Never more than now. But that was because he had never held them with chains, but with a thread. He feared for them, because he knew how people hate to suffer. The pain he was about to suffer, and the pain it would cause those who loved him, was humanly unbearable. They would be tempted to avoid it, and run away from him. Indeed, they would run away. A person can only bear so much. A gaping hole would be left in their lives by his departing. The disciples were hating the idea of a crucified Jesus.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Believing in a Too Little Jesus*

Had familiarity with Jesus bred a soft contempt? Judging by how often Jesus repeated himself, they were having a hard time buying what he was saying about it being good for him to “depart,” i.e., be crucified and die. They didn’t ask the right question, which would have been simply “Where are you going?” (v. 5). Instead, they asked each other, “What in the world is he talking about?” (v. 18). The signs they had already seen, beginning with water-into-wine, had them believing—but in what? Not yet did they believe him capable of conquering the world!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Goners*

Soon enough, they feared, gone would be their leader. Gone their friend. Gone the peace. Gone the courage. Gone the optimism, the *joie de vivre*. Gone the braggadocio, the sense of entitlement from being Jesus’ inner circle. That bad old cross would take away Jesus, they thought, and leave them bereft of hope, peace, joy.

PROGNOSIS: Good Cross

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Come Again?*

Cryptically, Jesus laid out to them—beforehand, so that when it came to pass they would believe!—how it would be from now on. It would be like the kind of joy a woman has when she sees her baby for the first time! The Advocate would come, who would glorify their friend, their Jesus, by taking what belonged to Jesus and declaring it to them. It would be like the old times, except better.

How should we read the figure of a newborn child (16:21)? Do we take away only that joy overcomes anguish? Or is the newborn child actually the church which is born from Jesus’ dying and rising? Or is the newborn child the Christ himself, “born in us today”? However we take it, parturition itself is unmistakably a

metaphor for a “good cross.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Loving the Crucified*

Before he went the way of the cross, Jesus taught them that they would believe in him all the more after they passed through that hour. They would, in fact, begin talking about him as The Crucified. Just as he foretold, in the pre-cross talk, they would enter a continual conversation of hearing and asking, living in the Father and in the Spirit and in the Crucified one. They would have peace and joy and courage like never before. If it were not so, would he have told them?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Your Joy Will Be Complete*

Why did he talk that way? Why did he die on the cross in the first place? Why should they rejoice at his imminent departure? Because, although in the world they would face persecution (some will think they please God by killing you!), they should be courageous. He has conquered the world. By his cross. Good cross.