

ALREADY...NOT YET

As we're sailing through the Sundays of Eastertide, hearing from the Book of Acts the stories of the successes of the early Church, and from John's Jesus poetic theological prose, known as the Farewell Discourse. His words are an attempt to calm the disciples, who are deeply uneasy and almost panicked at the prospect of Jesus' absence. Surely there is some analogy to the threatened despair of all of us folks in churches today who are anxious and fretful in the face of steady decline in church attendance through almost the whole Church in the developed world.

His long discourses are post-Easter education for the Church, teaching us about Jesus' absence—and his presence. The teaching plan for these readings is that we should learn how to know God in Christ, and how to follow him. For me, these are lessons that never end. I touch on them—hear them, remember them, consider them, quarrel with them, admire them in one form or another—every day. We hear and see post-Resurrection appearances; we hear the evocative, almost incantatory words of Jesus as he outlines what the Church would later formalize as the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—or, as we sometimes say in the church, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. The Spirit is coming to reveal, to comfort, to reassure, to strengthen.

Jesus' subject is the kingdom of God, which he ushers in and assures us all that he leaves it behind for us as he returns to the Father. What is this

kingdom, how are we to think of it, what does it mean to talk about it, to invoke it, in his absence? In the last century theologians have come up with one way to describe what Jesus is saying about the coming of the kingdom. It is here with Jesus on one hand, but on the other it is not fully here, not here in the way it will be when he returns. The church calls it “already—and not yet.” He is already here, but he is not yet fully or completely here as he promises to be.

Listen to Jesus, saying things that can expand and unfold in your mind and heart: “In a while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” The word “in” can be profoundly important in the English language. It is hugely versatile in its meanings, from trivial to profound. You can be in the garage or in a mall. But you can also be in danger, or in love—or living in Christ.

The sacrament of communion is living our decisions to live in Christ, and symbolically, to have Christ live in us through the very stuff of life, this bread and this wine.

How, then, should we live in Christ? This is where I make an abrupt turn to talk about the cross just turned. Let me say first that I don’t see the disagreement over the cross as a matter of right and wrong as much as it is about what in the Christian message is emphasized. For me the value of having

this cross before us as you see it again this morning is that it is a sermon in itself about Jesus' life and his message for us. He lived for others, and especially for the rejected, the despised, those who suffer in mind and body. In his ministry they mattered most, not the powers that ruled his world and ours. He was, as the pastor and Christian martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, a man for others, and he was killed because of it.

That is how Christ wants us to live: as men and women who live to love and serve others—and especially others who are beyond self, beyond family, beyond national and tribal loyalties. God in Christ is love—all encompassing, universal love that we experience as compassion when we encounter the suffering of the world and when we act to lessen that suffering.

Our human nature, which is self-preserving and tribal, resists this enlarging of what it means to love so far beyond our own selfish interests, and our natures and our world tells us that we need not, that we should not, be so extreme. For Jesus of Nazareth, the cross was the result. This cross is a reminder that he always calls us to be more than our culture and our instincts will allow. The message of Jesus shows us that we can be and do much more in love than we are inclined to accept. This is another sign that Christ is here among us already—*and* not yet. We joyfully greet the empty tomb and the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. But because we are always inclined

to fall into being only human, the hard truth of the cross is always with us. The risen Christ is already here, and, sad to say, and hopeful to say, not yet.