

The Eyes of the Heart

A Sermon on John 14:15-21 and 1 Peter 3:13-22

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.*

The Disciples Finally Understand - Right?

The disciples may have felt that they finally had things figured out. The rising from the dead thing was a surprise, but now that they were getting accustomed to Jesus showing up, walking through locked doors, breaking bread and opening the scriptures to them, now that even the doubters proclaimed “my Lord and my God” upon seeing their risen Lord, maybe now they felt that they knew what was going on. They finally understood that he had to die, and that death could not hold the Son of God. Maybe by this point, they thought that nothing would surprise them anymore.



A New Surprise

Yeah, I think God laughs at us a little playfully when we think that we have him figured out, and then proceeds to show us how surprising he can be. In today’s Gospel reading, John is telling us about how Christ was preparing his disciples for the next surprise that



they had coming. Things were about to change for the disciples yet again, and in ways they had trouble understanding. He didn’t stay dead, death could no longer have any power over him, so what could he mean by saying that he was going to the Father and that the world would no longer



see him? While Christ leaves much of that a mystery, he does speak to his disciples so that they know what is coming, and that their Lord and God will not be abandoning them.

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You will keep my commandments

He leads this explanation saying that those who love him *will* keep his commandments.

When I was first considering going to divinity school, and talking about this with one of my professors, he pointed out that many of the commands Christ gives to his disciples are in the future tense, indicative mood. That is to say, that these were not things that were a good idea to do, or that you'd better do if you did not want to disappoint God. They were things that you were *going* to do, because that is what life in Christ looks like. It was meant to be comforting and explanatory.

It is [also just] good advice. It does not matter what else is going on, you're not going to stop doing what is right. We can come up with all sorts of rationalizations for why we can get away with not loving God or neighbor, and the seeming absence of their Lord would make a seductive excuse. Yet times in which God seems distant are par for the course in the spiritual life, as almost every monk and mystic will tell you about the "dark night of the soul" - and how in these times, it is especially important to keep on anyway.

The Promise of the Paraclete

And we can have confidence that this is the right thing to do because of the rest of Christ's explanation, as John tells it, with the promise that even though their physical relationship to Christ would change, that they were not actually forgotten by God, but that he would even send the Holy Spirit to be with them.



I always find it interesting to look at what Christians of the first few centuries thought about various parts of scripture, and the Church Fathers go nuts over this passage, as they try to wrap their minds around the Holy Spirit. Many of our ancestors in the faith pointed out that the Holy Spirit was already active in the world, and

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in the lives of the disciples, certainly, just not in the same way or as fully. We'll hear more about their ideas in a minute or two.

John records the explanation for why the Holy Spirit needed to be sent down when the Spirit was already active in the world. "The world cannot receive the Spirit because it neither sees him nor knows him."

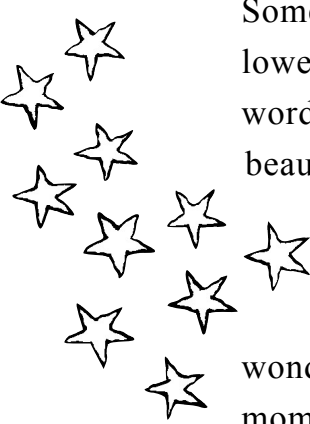
The disciples on the other hand, because they have known this Holy Spirit that is among them, can receive him. Likewise, when he tells his disciples that the world will no longer see him, he says that *they* will see him.

To me this sounds a lot like what **C.S. Lewis** was trying to get across in one of the volumes of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. The specific scene I am thinking of has a couple of children and their Uncle Andrew watching as a world is created, sung into existence by the mighty lion Aslan.

"In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. It was far away and...sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it.

...Then two wonders happened at the same moment. One was that the voice was joined by other voices, more voices than you could possibly count.

They were in harmony with it...cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars...One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leaped out - single stars, constellations, and planets, brighter and bigger than any in our world...If you had seen and hear it...you would have felt quite certain that it was the stars themselves which were singing, and that it was the First Voice, the deep one, which had made them appear and made them sing.



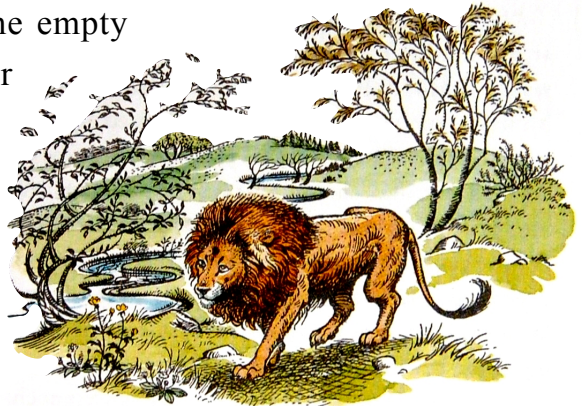
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...The Voice on the earth was now louder and more triumphant...And now something else was beginning.

Far away, and down near the horizon, the sky was began to turn gray...The eastern sky changed from white to pink and from pink to gold. The Voice rose and rose, till all the air was shaking with it. And just when it swelled to the mightiest and most glorious sound it had yet produced, the sun arose...as its beams shot across the land the travelers could see for the first time what sort of place they were in. ...There was not a tree, not a bush, not a blade of grass to be seen. The earth was of many colors; they were fresh, hot and vivid. They made you feel excited; until you saw the Singer himself, and then you forgot everything else. It was Lion.

...The song had now changed...

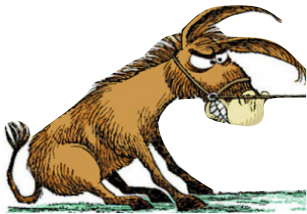
...The Lion was pacing to and fro about the empty land and singing his new song. It was softer and more lilting than the song by which he had called up the stars and the sun; a gentle, rippling music. And as he walked and sang, the valley grew green with grass. it spread out from the Lion like a pool..."



This goes on a while as other plants and then animals likewise come into being. But all of this was from the viewpoint of the children, who in their innocence and openness could see what was happening plainly. It was different for Uncle Andrew, "for what you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing: it also depends on what sort of person you are."

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“When the Lion had first begun singing, when it was still quite dark, he had realized that the noise was a song. And he had disliked the song very much. It made him think and feel things he did not want to think and feel. Then, when the sun rose and he saw that the singer was a lion (“only a lion,” as he said to himself) he tried his hardest to make believe that it wasn’t singing and never had been singing - only roaring as any lion might in a zoo in our own world. “Of course it can’t really have been singing,” he thought, “I must have imagined it. I’ve been letting my nerves get out of order Who ever heard of a lion singing?” And the longer and more beautiful the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now, the trouble with



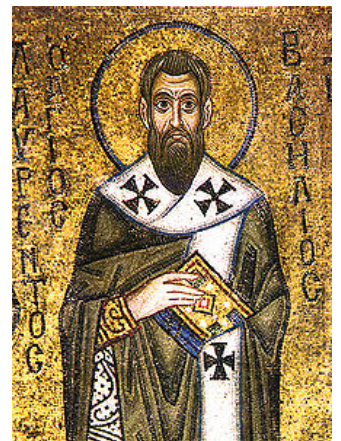
trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan’s song. Soon he couldn’t have heard anything else even if he had wanted to.”

I think Uncle Andrew’s obstinance is the sort of thing that keeps the rest of the world from knowing and receiving the Spirit. In order to see God at work in the world and in your life, you kind of have to be open to the idea, to the possibility.

The Fathers explain this as seeing with the eyes of the heart, which is an art that many people don’t practice much.

Basil, one of greatest Christian minds of the 4th century wrote that:

“Jesus applied the word “world” to those who being bound by this material and carnal life and beholding the truth by material sight alone... were ordained to see our Lord no more...For the [individual] who has never trained his mind for contemplation...is powerless to look up to the spiritual light of the truth.”



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Likewise, **Gregory** the Great, who lived in the sixth century, describes the irony of this, “as secular minds broaden their horizons by focussing on the outward things of this world, they constrict the ability of the arteries of the heart to admit the spirit.”



But what does it actually mean to see with the eyes of the heart? Why is it that Christ’s disciples were going to be able to see Christ and the Spirit in this spiritual way that the world could not? How are we to practice this art? I think the Fathers just told us.

Don’t get overly caught up in the anxieties of life. Train the mind in contemplation - by which they mean prayer of the heart. Allow the Spirit to work within you. Be open to seeing God in the world, and take the time to look around with this openness and expectation, and you will find it.



But the wonder of this promise Jesus makes to send the Spirit to the disciples- it goes well beyond this openness that allows one to accept the reality of the presence of the Spirit. This Spirit, this “paraclete” comforter/advocate/helper is to live not just among us, but in us, forever, just as Christ is in the Father, and we are in Christ. In this way, we share the life of God as we experience the loving energies of God, welling up from within us and flowing out from us, giving life to the world around us.