

Trinity 4

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

I RECKON that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

As I always say, it's a beautiful day! Every day is a beautiful day, rain or shine, and for good reason — it's a glimpse into the beauty of God's creation.

Each day when I awake, I am awed by what I see outside my window. It's but a small portion of the world, yet what a beautiful view. And small though it may be, it is, nonetheless, representative of the greater universe meticulously created and set in order by a loving God.

Yet, as we all know, everything in this world has a fleeting beauty. It is here today and gone tomorrow. Still, in its moment, each creature, each created element, animate or inanimate, has its splendor.

Our world — this small sphere in the midst of such a vast universe — our world is a paradox of beauty and death. Truly a paradox.

When we read the passage from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, that is what we are confronted with, a paradox: is all of creation beautiful as we perceive it, or is this just a dying, decaying world in which we live?

This particular passage from St. Paul is not so easy to understand; and the answer to the question that pits beauty against decay is equally difficult; so it's no surprise that we are faced with a paradox; even among various Bible scholars and commentators, it evokes diverse interpretations.

What might Paul be thinking?

To begin to understand, we must take into consideration his vision of redemption, that it involves the glorious transformation of the whole universe, all of creation, animate and inanimate.

It was by Adam's Fall that we and all of creation were brought into a state of suffering; by his disobedience, we were made subject to pain, sickness, and death.

Note that Paul does not single out mankind but all living creatures, even the inanimate, the whole natural order, for all is subject to death and decay.

Our present state is not a pretty picture, and, if we dwell on this picture, there is a sense of gloom and impending doom that overshadows the beauty around us and erodes the beauty within us.

But Paul tells us that as Christians, there is hope, and that the sufferings of this present world, our present life, are nothing compared with the glory of eternity with God.

When we are baptized, we become adopted children of God, and look forward to the day when we will receive the full blessing of adoption: that day is the day of judgment.

We acknowledge in the "Prayer of Thanksgiving" that we are "heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom."

We are kept, preserved, and sustained in our trials by that hope. It is a hope seen but not in our possession. It is an "earnest expectation." We eagerly await; we scan the horizon for the first signs of that dawn, the daybreak of Glory.

As we crane our necks for that first glimmer of light, though it is fleeting, we do have the beauty of all God's creation that surrounds us to remind us of the glory that awaits.

In the meantime, we have the power of the Gospel and the sacraments of the Church to sustain our souls, without which it would be all too easy to give way to a sense of futility, of despair.

As Christians we have joys that the world does not know. Yes, we do have sorrows but we are blessed with the "first fruits of the Spirit."

In that we have died with Christ through baptism, and have risen again to a new life filled with the "first fruits of the Spirit," we see beyond worldly despair in hope of a new age to come; we see life, not death.

What are the "first fruits of the spirit"?

We find them listed in St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians:

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

Each Fruit of the Spirit has a special meaning to the Christian:

Love is at the top of the list, the fulfilling of the law, the bond of perfectness, and without which a profession of religion is insignificant;

Joy, which comes in the love of God;

Peace, coming about as the result of reconciliation with God;

Long-suffering, not just in affliction and trial, or when injured by others, but a patient bearing and enduring of present evils with joyfulness, being strengthened by the Holy Spirit; being slow to anger, ready to forgive injuries, putting up with affronts, and bearing with, and forbearing one another;

Gentleness, as a disposition; mildness of temper, calmness of spirit, an unruffled disposition, and a disposition to treat all with urbanity and politeness;

Goodness, being the sense of beneficence, or a disposition to do good to others;

Faithfulness, or perhaps "fidelity" is a better translation of the Greek, being the word for trustworthy or reliable;

Meekness, expressed in humility and lowliness of mind, of which Christ is an eminent example and pattern; and

Temperance, or "continence," being, particularly, moderation in eating and drinking.

While St. Paul paints a picture of this world fallen into sin and decay, he uses this picture to bring into focus his vision of the transformation of the whole realm of creation from the curse of suffering and corruption to restoration by Christ to the way it was in the beginning, before the Fall of Adam.

No doubt, St. Paul's message in his letter to the Romans is quite sobering; but his vision of our future as Christians reflects his understanding of God's unfailing love for all His creation, and God's desire that we truly choose to love Him as our Heavenly Father.

As Christians, we live not only in the world, but also in Christ; we see not only this world, but also, we look beyond this world to the glory that awaits.

As Christians, we see not only the sin and corruption of the world, but also God's mercy, His grace, and His love beautifully displayed around us.

As Christians, we see so great a love, as He took on our flesh and sacrificed Himself on the Cross, being resurrected in His glorified body that we might have the hope of redemption, being resurrected also from death and corruption; He did not forsake us but sent the Holy Spirit to comfort us and sustain us 'til the day of redemption.

As we await that glorious day of redemption, we are left to marvel at the beauty of all God's creation, each creature, each sunset, each sunrise; even the sounds of music, the birds, the wind, rain, thunder.

We live in a paradox: the beauty of all of creation in the midst of a dying, decaying world.

Truly, when we take the time to observe all the beauty that surrounds us, the magnificence of all God's creation, and the solemn beauty of His Presence in the Eucharist, then we can only long for that moment of redemption when we will regain our true destiny as Children of God, and enter into a peace and beauty that transcends our human comprehension.

The foretaste of that beauty is love: a love that knows no bounds, is selfless, and so exquisitely expressed by St. Paul in his First Epistle to the Corinthians as the ultimate ideal of the Christian life; the ideal to which every spiritual exercise and discipline should draw us ever closer, unveiling for us that love which should motivate and sustain all our thoughts and actions as we await the dawn of glory.