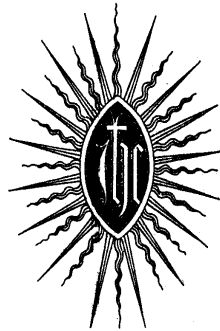


# THE TRADITIONAL ANGLICAN CHURCH PROVISIONAL PARISH OF ST. LUKE, AMPHILL

Rev'd Michael Gray 15 Chesterfield Road, Cambridge CB4 1LN (01223) 426278



**Easter III 13-04-08**

*“your joy no man taketh from you”* (Gospel).

The way St. John understands his Master and Lord is in terms of seemingly rather simple contrasts. Here we have sorrow and joy; the world and the disciples (by implication but only by implication the church). We need to be quite careful to unpack these contrasts correctly. I believe that though the discourses which St. John attributes to Jesus are his own compositions, they depend on profound experience of Jesus' actual teaching and also a profound experience of the resurrection life – so if we want to be followers of Jesus and to live the life of the early Christians in such way as is now open to us, we would be foolish indeed not to take St. John – and his Master and Lord – seriously.

I think St. John's meaning of the “world” is that it is life (including human life but quite possibly a wider range of conscious existence) conducted without God, usually with a hint of conscious rebellion against God. It is not said that people living without God either are or ought to be miserable (except in the sense that they are “miserable sinners” who need God's pity – but so are we!) But their situation is unnatural. God made the world good, and filled it with light; and if the appreciation of this is lost (if, as St. John says, men prefer darkness (John 3.19), then of course nothing makes sense. Perhaps an atheist like Shelley was a little more truthful than he intended when he wrote of the world as a place “where we find our happiness *or not at all*”.

St. John tells us that the world resents those to whom joy (and the other fruits of the spirit) appear even possibilities, and much more if those possibilities are actual. On its terms, all believers are deluded; if they experience joy, this all rests on fundamental mistake; we “ought” to be more unhappy than the world. This is what underlies much persecution of Christians by the media.

Some Christians have taught as if the only way to appreciating the joy of the Christian life was by first denigrating the world and persuading people of their utter misery. I am not convinced of the tactic. Even if it is tried on us, that does not make it wise to retaliate. In proportion as people learn to appreciate the joy of the new life, they will see the inadequacies of the world and learn to what extent sorrow was appropriate. They may need us to appreciate that possibility of joy. In that sense it is true that all Christians are called upon to be missionaries – which is not the same as pestering people about God on every occasion. We *may* have to speak our joy; we certainly have to live it. Maybe the epistle reading seems dull, little more than Christian survival tactics; but we are promised joy rather than excitement, and these are our duties while in the world.

Remember how I expounded St. John's meaning of the world – we are not here talking about the created order, and neither we nor the world at large should be miserable about that. The Church sings in this season:

“Lo the fair beauty of earth, from the death of the winter arising.  
Every good gift of the year now to its master returns.”

For “God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good”, and even if spoilt it yet does show its original goodness.

Christians are not called to be perpetually happy; it is not in our power, and we cannot escape sorrows in this life. Even Christ while he might have escaped them chose not to do so. Indeed, the way to joy for us, the only possible way, lay through the suffering of the cross, which besides all the physical pain meant consciousness of rejection by his own people and of failure to communicate his message even to his own disciples. Our joy was purchased at a high price indeed.

Jesus granted his immediate disciples his physical presence after the resurrection, eating and drinking with them and so demonstrating the Father's triumph in him. Nothing less could have got the Church going. Yet it could not continue like that. It seems to have been very clear to the disciples that these incidents of physical presence would stop, and indeed that their stopping was far from disheartening, rather a further confirmation of the truth of the new life. The message of Jesus is not “I have survived” (as Islamists blaspheme, denying that a prophet of God, as they falsely understand Jesus, could suffer) but “be of good cheer, I have overcome the world”. I have taken on all the powers of the world, both political and spiritual, and even death itself. I have taken upon myself everything that they could throw at me, and I have triumphed over them (compare Colossians 2.15). The Christian life is lived as a consequence of that triumph.

*The readings are: 1 Peter 2.11-17 ; John 16.16-22, but it is worth reading on to the end of the chapter. We next meet on May 25th.*