

“A Little While”

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—April 23, 2017

[Jesus] said to them, “Are you inquiring among yourselves about what I said, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’? Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament..., but your sorrow will be turned into joy.” (John 16:19-20)

The second time. One of the marks of great achievement in the movie industry is to produce a movie people want to see, not just once, but a second time. “Repeat viewers” are a critical target audience, partly because they’re willing to pay again, but also because they often bring their friends. It’s the same in the publishing industry: the mark of a great novel, one that could become a bestseller or even a classic, is its staying power—its ability to capture the imagination repeatedly.

But now imagine seeing a movie, or reading a novel, for the second time. Consider that it’s a suspenseful story, one during which the events are uncertain right up until the end, when they are masterfully resolved. The experience is going to be different the second time, because no matter how good the author or moviemaker is, we already know how things are going to turn out.

Yet the experience need not be disappointing. In fact, the thing that many people enjoy about reading a great book a second time, or watching a suspenseful movie again, is the opportunity to notice different things along the way. You view the characters differently the second time around. Instead of just focusing on what is going to happen next, the mind can take in nuances that were missed before, and see in new ways how the writer builds the events toward the climax and resolution.

The Easter story in the present tense. The reason for focusing on this “second time” experience is that the stories of the Word, and particularly the Easter story, fall into that category. Many of us can’t even remember the first time we read or heard the Easter story, therefore none of us can read the events leading up to it without knowing full well what the outcome is going to be. Who doesn’t know that Jesus will rise from the dead, or what the women will discover when they visit the tomb, or what the disciples’ reaction will be when He appears to them?

With this “we know the end of the story” mentality, we turn our attention to a portion of the Last Supper that the Lord had with His disciples. In doing so, we need to put ourselves into the mindset of people who don’t know the end of the most famous story ever told. In fact, the gospel of John records five chapters of information on this supper, during which Jesus talked to His disciples about the things that were about to happen, in an effort to prepare them.

Our specific focus is the words of Jesus: “A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me” (John 16:16). Think about the different impact these words have on *us* versus the *disciples*. Because we know the end of the story, we can easily see

what Jesus is talking about. In a little while, within a day's time, He would be captured and crucified—taken away from them. But then, on Easter Sunday, still “a little while” away, just three days, He would appear to them again.

Obviously, though, it wasn't so clear for the disciples. So we hear them saying to each other, “What is this that He says to us, ‘A little while and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’...? We do not know what He is saying” (John 16:17-18). In response, Jesus elaborated for them: “Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament...but your sorrow will be turned into joy” (John 16:20). Again, we know what He means: as the story unfolds we know that they would experience tremendous confusion and great sadness. Yet all that would be short-lived, because the Lord would return, and they would come to understand in new ways what His life was all about. Not only would they feel relief to see that He wasn't dead, but they would experience new levels of joy as they realized what they had really been prepared for—a movement that was so strong, that not even death could stop it, namely the coming of the kingdom.

Our own lives—in the present tense. We pause for a moment then, to reflect on this perspective we have just gained. Some human beings went through an amazing experience. At the time it was happening, they didn't know how it was going to turn out! Stopping right there, we could draw all kinds of inferences for our own lives. The truth is, we don't know how things are going to turn out either, as we live, moment by moment in the present.

There is a passage in the Writings for the New Church which speaks to this. It says, “A desire to know the future is innate in most people” (*Divine Providence* 179). But it goes on to say that this desire is not good for us. For one thing, our *not* knowing how things are going to turn out makes it so that we have to engage ourselves fully in the desired outcome. As this passage puts it, “It is permitted to everyone to employ his or her reason...[and] to consider in his inner self how he would act or live in order to arrive at” any desired outcome (*Ibid.*). In other words, the fact that we don't know the future means that we, like the disciples, have to work hard to get figure out our best course of action. Secondly, the fact that we don't know the future leads many of us to place our trust in the providence of the Lord. People who do so are given “a confidence that the Lord is directing their lot” (*Ibid.*).

In this context, we can listen again to the Lord's words to the disciples, as if they were spoken to us. “A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me” (John 16:16). What do they mean to us in the issues and challenges that come up for us? Psychologically speaking, whenever we face hardships, while we're actually in the middle of them, the Lord can seem distant, and it feels like it's all on us to muddle through (see *True Christian Religion* 126; *Arcana Coelestia* 840). We know from the Word that He is actually not distant at these times. In fact, there are teachings which indicate that He is more closely present with us in these times of difficulty than at any other times, and is fully engaged with us as we strive to get through them (*Ibid.*). But that's not often how it feels.

Let's focus in on some specific examples. A new widow wonders how to manage all of her affairs in the wake of her husband's transition to the next life. Parents worry about the long-term happiness and functionality of their teenage son, who is finding his own way and making some mistakes as he goes. A person suffers a heart attack at the age of fifty, and needs

bypass surgery. A family moves to a new town, to a place none of them have lived before, and wonder if they will be happy there. A series of challenges come up in a small business, causing doubt in the owner's mind as to whether the business will succeed or go under.

What are people feeling at that moment? Most of them would love to be able to project a little into the future to see how things turn out. "Will I manage?" asks the widow. "Is he going to find his way?" ask the parents. "Am I going to get back to a healthy life?" asks the fifty year old man. "Will we be happy in our new home?" asks the family. "Will my business survive?" asks the owner.

But that's not how things work. Instead of knowing, we can see these people getting to the place where they set about making their future what they hope it will be. This is the first thing the Lord calls us to do: to engage, or to use our prudence to work toward desired outcomes. The second thing to do is to trust in Him. To the extent that the people in these examples can, the Lord can give them a sense of confidence that He is "directing their lot," whether or not things turn out the way they expected (*Divine Providence* 179).

"A little while." It is in this latter context, of trusting in the Lord, that we remind ourselves of the phrase He used when speaking to His disciples: "A little while." The message the Lord seems to be sending to us is that the challenges in our lives, the hardships we face, will be resolved in "a little while."

Two teachings can help us with this. The first reminds us of the Lord's providence and care:

It should be recognized that Divine providence is overall, that is, it is present within the smallest details of all, and that people in the stream of providence are being carried along constantly towards happier things, whatever appearance the means may present. (*Arcana Caelestia* 8478:4).

The Lord said to the disciples, "A little while and you will not see Me, and again a little while and you will see Me", and He was referring to His resurrection. In the same way, He says to us, in effect, "You too will go through hardships, and you will wonder how things could possibly work out. But wait a little while, and you will see Me again. I will arise in your life. Joy will return. The issue will be resolved. It's going to be okay." And, relatively speaking, in just "a little while" He leads us all to make that big transition to the next life, when our resurrection will take place. For those who cooperate with the Lord, this means life in heaven where He can separate us from so much of what is sad for a time in this world.

The second teaching talks about the states of life and where they lead. "With those who are being regenerated interiors and exteriors are being arranged into order by the Lord for the purpose of all subsequent states" (*Arcana Caelestia* 10048). Consider the implications of this teaching: Whatever we are facing, the Lord is at work within it to arrange things into order, and this for the purpose of all subsequent states. What this means is that the Lord shapes us by means of our experiences, no matter how difficult, all the while bringing forward all that is useful for what comes next.

Think of the disciples again: At the Last Supper, the Lord told them many, many things. He showed them how to be servants by washing their feet, He taught them about the things to

come, He prayed for them, all so that they would be prepared for what was to come. He was “arranging things into order” for them. Then He was taken away from them for “a little while,” after which He returned. The reality of the situation is that the Lord had used the events leading up to and surrounding His crucifixion to prepare the disciples for their “subsequent states”, for their mission after His resurrection. We read that He appeared to them and said, “Peace to you! As the Father sent Me, I also send you” (John 20:21). All that had gone before had prepared them for this charge. It is the same with us, whether we realize it or not: the God of Easter is working within the events of our lives, gathering up all that is useful in the experiences we have, preparing us for subsequent states of usefulness.

Sadness turned to joy. We began by considering movies or books that are watched or read for the second time. When we consider the future, especially when things are troublesome for us, it is easy to wish to know the future, like reading the book of our lives the second time, and knowing how things are going to turn out. While that is not possible nor orderly for us, there is a Book that can help a tremendous amount. It’s a Book we’ve read from or been taught from many times in our lives, and in one sense it is the story of our lives, played out by means of the people we discover there. It is, of course, the Lord’s Word. Yes, we know the outcome of the stories of the Word, and yes, we know those stories are about us. So we can place ourselves in the shoes of the disciples at the Last Supper, as they endured the uncertain and troubling events of the Lord’s crucifixion. Life is uncertain for us too. We don’t know how our story will turn out. But one thing we do know is that the Lord says to us, “A little while and you will see Me.” “A little while, and all will be well.” “A new day will dawn, and with it will come relief where there has been confusion. And in the process, we have the opportunity to discover that the Lord is a God who is always there, always working for our happiness, and preparing us for our eternity. “Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament..., but your sorrow will be turned into joy” (John 16:19-20). **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord’s Word: John 16:16-22; *Divine Providence* 179; *Arcana Caelestia* 2405:8, 10,048

John 16

¹⁶“A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father.”

¹⁷Then some of His disciples said among themselves, “What is this that He says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father’?” ¹⁸They said therefore, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is saying.’

¹⁹Now Jesus knew that they desired to ask Him, and He said to them, “Are you inquiring among yourselves about what I said, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’? ²⁰Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. ²¹A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²²Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.”

Divine Providence 179

Since a foreknowledge of future events takes away fundamental humanity, which is to act in freedom in accordance with one’s reason, therefore it is granted to no one to know the future. But it is permitted all to employ their reason to form conclusions about things to come. Reason with all its constituents is then engaged in its life. It is because of this that people do not know their lot after death, or know any outcome until they arrive at it. For if they were to know, they would no longer consider in their inner self how they should act or live in order to arrive at it, but would think only in their outer self that they were approaching it; and this state closes the interior constituents of their mind in which the two faculties of their life mainly reside, the faculties of freedom and rationality.

Arcana Caelestia 10,048

With those who are being regenerated interiors and exteriors are being arranged into order by the Lord for the purpose of all subsequent states, so much so that things in the present entail those in the future, as do things in the future when they become those in the present, and so on forever. For the Lord foresees all things and provides all things, and His Foresight and Providence looks to eternity, and so is everlasting; for the Divine nature, which He alone possesses, is in itself infinite, and what is infinite in duration is everlasting. Consequently, whatever the Lord arranges into order is everlasting. This is what happens to those whom the Lord is regenerating; the regeneration of a person begins in the world and carries on forever, for when a person becomes an angel he or she is always being made more perfect.