

The Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Heavenly Perspective

Acts 13:14, 43–52

Psalm 100:1–3, 5

Revelation 7:9, 14b–17

John 10:27–30

In Act Five scene five of Shakespeare's Macbeth, we have one of the Bard's most famous soliloquys. Macbeth opines:

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.*

After hearing that his wife has died, Macbeth takes stock of his own indifference to the event. Death—our return to dust—seems to him merely the last act of a very bad play, an idiot's tale full of bombast and melodrama ("sound and fury"), but without meaning ("signifying nothing"). The monotonous "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" conveys the mechanical beat of time as it carries this poor player-king from scene to scene leading him to conclude, that in the end, life signifies nothing.

How we think of our lives is very much influenced by what we understand to be their deeper and underlying meaning. Is there a master play-write and director whose skillful care is shaping and leading life somewhere? Or are we, so to speak, on the meaningless stage of make believe? A life that in the end signifies nothing!

One King, named Macbeth came to this conclusion. Another King, named David came to another that is the polar opposite. In today's Psalm David declares:

*Know that the LORD is God.
 It is he that made us, and we are his;
 we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*For the LORD is good;
 his steadfast love endures forever,
 and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Here are words declaring that not only do we belong to God, but that he is the Good God who is steadfast in his love and always faithful.

So why is it, that some can say, life signifies nothing and another can say God's steadfast love endures forever thus infusing life with purpose and meaning?

It all depends on how we view suffering. Does suffering prove God's absence or even non-existence or is suffering the universal experience, that in the words of C.S. Lewis is God's megaphone. How do we live with the tension between a world where so many conclude that there is no God and therefore life is ultimately void of meaning and on the other hand declare that his love endures forever?

Although David did not know Jesus, his words were indeed inspired. When saying that we are the sheep of God's pasture David was anticipating these comforting words of Jesus.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand

Few passages express more vividly what Jesus means by this than Revelation chapter 7. For here we are given a perspective on life in this world from the vantage point of heaven.

Notice that St. John asks, who are these that I behold before me? The angel answers that these are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

What is the Great Ordeal? It is life in this world. It is the realm where turmoil, confusion and pain occurs. Read through the Book of Revelation. You will see clearly this world is incredibly chaotic, filled with such heartache and unremitting suffering. Those who have come out of the great ordeal have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb. 28 times in the Revelation this is the phrase used to depict Jesus. The Lamb who was slain, whose blood was poured out. Here we see that the one who is God entered fully into the Great Ordeal and still from the vantage point of heaven is actively engaged in its problems.

The Great Ordeal. What a helpful and descriptive phrase to define our present circumstances. This is the way we are to understand our lives in this present world. Why is there so much pain, why is there so much suffering. It is because this is the realm of the Great Ordeal. One day it will be behind us. But for now the Great Ordeal is the very air we breathe.

It was into this Great Ordeal the Lamb of God entered. Here we gaze on the Suffering One, Jesus the Compassionate Solution, the Shepherd who knows us by name and who endured the same evils - even more intensely than we do. Jesus who is God with us through the Great Ordeal.

Because Jesus is God with us this so to speak gets God off the hook when the question is asked:

if there is a loving God why is there suffering,

because God in Christ Jesus was on the hook. For Christians, the problem of evil can only be addressed by looking first to Jesus. This great dilemma is resolved only in an encounter with the God who suffers and dies and rises with us and for us because he knows the Great Ordeal first hand.

It is this Lamb who is now in heaven. See with your imagination what St. John saw. Here is the clearest depiction of heaven in the New Testament.

The great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

Here is the worship of heaven. The picture is one of true Catholicity. Every colour, every ethnicity, all tongues are represented. They are before the Throne of God the Father and before the Lamb, who in Revelation is Jesus. Why are they dressed in white? The white garments worn by angels and saints in Revelation (4:4; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14) symbolize both purity and victory.

They are also holding palm branches. What are the branches representing? They were used at a Jewish Festival called Tabernacles. This festival remembered the time when Israel was a people who were sojourners, wandering through the Sinai Desert. The palm branches were used in worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, thus celebrating that the Jews were no longer a Nomadic People, but had a home, Israel; a capital, Jerusalem; and a centre of worship, the Temple. The palms were an expression of worship that was joined with thanksgiving songs in praise to God for the end of the desert wanderings.

What the Feast of Tabernacles for-shadowed is now actualized in heaven. Here we see depicted the true and eternal worship. The sojourn wandering through this world of the Great Tribulation is over for those assembled in heaven. Listen to what else is said.

***For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.***

Here worship will be unending and there will be such security for the Great Ordeal is now in the past and God the Father will provide the shelter needed to rest fully in his protecting care.

***¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;***

Here are mentioned representative experiences of those going through the Great Ordeal. No longer will there be inequality between the peoples where some are in want and other have plenty. No longer will the elements react aggressively towards the earth, as represented by the scorching heat. All this will be over. And now hear this!

*¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

Every tear that was shed through the Great Ordeal will be wiped away. Every pain, all suffering will be remembered and worked through and complete healing will restore us as we drink from the springs of the water of life.

And there will be Jesus. Jesus, whose Cross is now at the centre of our Churches, to remind us where we still are, in the midst of the Great Ordeal will be replaced by the Throne in Heaven. The Throne that declares the Great Ordeal is now over and death and evil have been defeated. Alleluia.

Only this perspective can lead us to reject the conclusion that “life is full of sound and fury signifying nothing.” Instead we can sing out:

*For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*