

“Alleluia cannot always be our song while here below” is a striking thought. I forget how we came to be discussing hymn 82 (A&MR) this time last year, but we decided that this year we must sing it. I don’t remember having it before. “Alleluia cannot always be our song while here below” is a reference to the custom of giving up “Alleluias” for Lent. We don’t sing or say Alleluia during Lent and, therefore, in these three Sundays before Ash Wednesday – Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima – we say farewell to Alleluia. That’s always seemed odd to me, but there are reasons.

Hallelujah is Hebrew for “Praise the Lord.” Hallelujah is the language of heaven. Here on earth we Christian people, the Church of God, join in the song of heaven in our daily lives and in our Sunday worship. “Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, for ever praising you and saying: Holy, holy, holy...” Alleluia is the worship of Easter, the worship of heaven, the worship of the Resurrection, Christ’s Resurrection and ours. Alleluia is our eternal song in heaven.

But we are not in heaven yet and it is no use pretending we are. Some Christians always walk about with a silly grin on their faces and seem to think it is some sort of weakness to admit any trouble or unhappiness. Other Christians, on the other hand, always seem to go about looking miserable as if there were no reasons at all to be joyful here on earth. Both are wrong of course. There are plenty of reasons always to be joyful, but not always to be happy.

Of course joy transcends happiness and unhappiness. You can be joyful and unhappy at the same time! Joy is experienced at a much more profound level than mere cheerfulness or disappointment or even sadness. At funerals, I value highly those lines from the hymn,
“I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless; ills have no weight and tears no bitterness.
Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory? I triumph still, if thou abide with me.”

We speak of the “sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life”. The resurrection, our Easter life, is a sure and certain hope, not a facile optimism or a pretence that there is nothing really wrong with us, or with the world around us, or that people don’t die or that there is no pain or suffering in the world. There are, sadly, but there are.

“Alleluia cannot always be our song while here below” because evil is real. Pain and suffering and death exist. There is such a thing as sin and we are sinners, redeemed sinners indeed, if we have faith in Christ, but sinners for all that, until we attain to the resurrection of the dead.

Bad things happen in the world, Bad things happen to us. We should be heartless if we didn’t mourn our loved ones who die. We should be liars if we said we were never troubled by pain or weakness. We could hardly claim to love our neighbours as ourselves if we didn’t feel for their pain. St Paul teaches us: “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.” The true meaning of sympathy is to feel with someone – to share his or her

pains, to share his or her joy. If we love God, we surely share something of what God must feel when He looks down from heaven at all the sin and pain and evil that there is on earth.

We cannot always be singing “Alleluia”. The world is a troubled place and people of compassion share in its woes. If we didn’t, we couldn’t sympathise and it’s hard to see how we could love without caring.

Suffering and sin are closely related. It’s not a simple relationship. We might think that the worst sinners should suffer most, but it doesn’t work out that way. There is, however, a close connection between suffering and sin. We may suffer as the victims of other people’s sin. We may suffer as the victims of our own sin. We may suffer as the perpetrators of sin. Sin makes us sorry. In sorrow, we don’t sing Alleluia. In Lent, especially, we are invited by the Church to examine our lives for sin, to investigate how we fall short of the love of God, and to repent, to be sorry for our sin, to show penitence. That’s why we don’t sing Alleluia in Lent. It’s a symbol of our penitence and sorrow for sin, just as Good Friday and Easter stand for our crucifixion and resurrection with Christ.

Sin and suffering are real and it is foolish to think that Christians can live as though they were not. Yet Christ is with us in our sin and suffering. He is our companion in our daily lives. He is with us not only on the sunny uplands but also in the valley of the shadow of death. He gladly bears our burden of sin. He exhorts us to lay our cares upon Him. It is because Christ is always with us, because we are in Christ and He in us, that joy transcends both happiness and unhappiness. Our Alleluias resound in the heavenly places because of Him, but He also shares in our groanings and in our sadness. He prays for us even when our resources for praying are all used up.

So long as we are on earth, there are times when Alleluia might be sung meaninglessly as we pretend, “I’m all right, Jack,” when we’re not all right at all. There are times when we need to confess our sins, times to admit our weakness and pain, times to accept the enormity of the troubles which we have to face, times genuinely to sympathise with the sin and suffering of our fellow human beings. There are times when it is wise not to pretend that we feel like Alleluia, to acknowledge our need to lament and to save Alleluia for when once again it is real for us.

Jesus is God with us, God with us, no matter what may happen to us, God with us no matter how we may feel. There is a Christian joy which transcends all our sins and sorrows. We do indeed now see as through a glass darkly, but we do see. We do indeed now know in part, but we do truly know something of God. Certainly we are known of Him. We are on a journey to that place where we shall see Him face to face and know Him as He knows us. Then indeed we shall sing and forever:

“Alleluia, song of sweetness,
voice of joy that cannot die;
 alleluia is the anthem
ever raised by choirs on high;
in the house of God abiding
 thus they sing eternally.”