

John 16:16-24



The Gospel of John is at once easy to read and difficult to interpret. In its seeming simple language and images, the Gospel of John offers a radical alternative world that stretches the mind beyond its limits. You come away from reading this Gospel with a sense that it has subdued you; you have not conquered it. One is humbled by the challenge to interpret it.

Pondering the meaning of our text took me back to memories of my maternal grandfather (who died in 1964), who spent a great deal of time meditating on the Hindu Scriptures and reading other religious writings, including the Bible. He willingly invited members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, when they would come calling, to sit and talk about their understanding about God. Members of the Brethren Church and other Christian Churches were also welcomed. In those conversations, topics about God, and truth, and how we know God and are to live in this life, and what is in store beyond this life were common. Of course, the central question had to do with Jesus' relationship to God the Father and how he saves. In that inter-religious world, there was a fascination with Jesus, especially the Jesus of St. John's Gospel. That Jesus who would say, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me" (v. 16) had a spelling-binding effect.

Another effect on me in pondering our text in St. John's Gospel was of remembering the lines from the poem *Morte d'Arthur* (The death of Arthur) by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "More things are wrought by prayer Than this world dreams of." King Arthur and his knights had fought their last battle and he was mortally wounded. Sir Bedivere, the one remaining knight is with him; Belvidere has, at last, very reluctantly followed the dying king's command to throw Excalibur, King Arthur's sword, into the lake. There would be no connection to the great King and the glorious past he and the others had known with him. It was to Sir Bedivere that the words I just quoted were spoken. Let me read a longer excerpt from this very powerful poem, so full of pathos, which both May and I remembered brought tears to our eyes when we read it as young high schoolers. (By the way, she is a bit younger, as I am 28 and she is not!) As I read the text of the poem, try to bring to mind Jesus' words to his

disciples as they hear from him that the world they have known with him will soon pass away, “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy” (v. 20). Here is the excerpt:

Then loudly cried the bold Sir Bedivere,
 ‘Ah! my Lord Arthur, whither shall I go?
 Where shall I hide my forehead and my eyes?
 For now I see the true old times are dead,
 When every morning brought a noble chance, 230
 And every chance brought out a noble knight.
 Such times have been not since the light that led
 The holy Elders with the gift of myrrh.
 But now the whole ROUND TABLE is dissolved
 Which was an image of the mighty world; 235
 And I, the last, go forth companionless,
 And the days darken round me and the years,
 Among new men, strange faces, other minds.’
 And slowly answer’d Arthur from the barge:
 ‘The old order changeth, yielding place to new, 240
 And God fulfils Himself in many ways,
 Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.
 Comfort thyself: what comfort is in me?
 I have lived my life, and that which I have done
 May He within Himself make pure! but thou, 245
 If thou shouldst never see my face again,
 Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
 Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
 Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
 For what are men better than sheep or goats 250
 That nourish a blind life within the brain,
 If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
 Both for themselves and those who call them friend?...’

(“The Passing of Arthur” [Morte d’Arthur] in *Idylls of the King*, by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (Garden City, NY: Dolphin Books, Doubleday Co., Inc., n.d.), 313f.)

Jesus knows that his disciples do not understand what he had said about his death, resurrection, and ascension. He knows that they will understand only after the resurrection. Their way of life was changing and he was preparing them for it. He reassures them that on account of him, when he is no longer in the flesh with them, their prayers to the Father in Jesus’ Name will be heard. His Name is life-giving. His relationship with the Father guarantees them that they, too, will share in that

relationship. Yes, his death will bring sadness and mourning; but that will be only for a short while. He who was from the very beginning with God and by whom everything that is came to be is the one who is the way to the Father. Yes, a whole way of being with him is passing and that in a tragic and gruesome way: death on the cross. But their life is not to be characterised by wistful living in the past; rather, it is to be lived in the confidence that they may ask anything of the Father in Jesus' Name and it will be granted. Asking anything of the Father in Jesus' Name will complete their joy in knowing that they share in the relationship Jesus has with the Father. This, too, is to be the life we live in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen One.

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