

Absolute Victory – Its Sights, Sounds, and Taste

Luke 24:50-53

The Ascension of Our Lord

May 13, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, “While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

What does absolute victory look like? What does it sound like? What does it taste like? How does it fill the senses? I suppose that depends in part on who is the enemy? If your passion is sports, and the enemy is the rival team, is absolute victory winning the championship every year for the remainder of sports history? Speaking of history, perhaps a memorable image of what was thought to be absolute victory was the image of jubilation-filled streets of America’s cities when World War II was won. Today, is absolute victory the less jubilant, more relieved American people pulling their iPhones out of their pockets to watch the “video gone viral” in which the president declares Covid is over and masks can be taken off... and then the relieved, if not somewhat irritated, Americans slide the iPhones back into their pockets and go on with their day?

All of those are certainly images of victory of some sorts, but – sadly – we know they do not last. They're not absolute. A sport in which the same team wins every year gets boring and no one watches or the rules get changed to make the sport competitive again. The glorious victories of World War II didn't last long, as the very ideology America defeated *then* already *now* has a close kin in our universities and corporate board rooms and even in our nation's capital. And, whatever relief we know with the end of Covid will only remind us that the other consequences of the Fall are still around and some other disease (maybe another pandemic) will eventually bring us to the grave.

So, what does absolute victory look like? We can ask the disciples, for they saw it with their own eyes: the Lord of glory, having completed his Messianic course, now ascending on high to his rightful place at the right hand of the Father, having all things put as a footstool under his feet to govern Creation and pour out his blessing upon his Church. We can ask the apostle John, who being given the vision of the coronation of the ascended One, writes,

“Between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it *had* been slain... And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated in the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals,

for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God.”

There's what absolute victory looks like... all authority in heaven and on earth, because by his own holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death “It is finished” and he ascends in triumph, to reside upon the throne... or, as our own altar, our own stained glass, show the Lamb *in repose*... no salvific work left to accomplish; the victory is complete, it is certain and it is absolute!

But, that scene is known experientially in the *heavenly* places. What about for the Church below, where it seems the world, the devil, and my sinful flesh don't recognize their war is lost? We Christians struggle with that, don't we?... this recognition that there is no *experiential euphoria* in our daily lives. We still feebly struggle, and we wonder, “What does Christ's victory mean for me? What does it look like for me here and now?” Well, let the Scriptures answer that for you: our text says that Jesus “parted from them and was carried up into heaven.” And what is the resulting scene of victory *for the Church on earth*?:

“... And they worshiped him” (the word for worship is not the euphoric celebratory Greek word *latreia*, but the Greek word that conveys humility, reverence, beggarly worship: *proskyneo*. The text goes on,) “They returned to Jerusalem with great joy (recall, joy comes from the same root word as *grace*... you can only have great joy if you live in the truth of God's grace toward you because of the

victory of God's Christ)... they returned "with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God."

So then, what does Christ's absolute victory look *and sound* like upon the earth? What does the joy of the Church basking in the warmth of Christ's victory look and sound like?... not the chaotic euphoria American Christianity paints of the scene in its movies and films, where the disciples watch Jesus ascend into heaven, then go away high-fiving and hugging each other and "feeling the spirit" all the time: Rather, as Jesus even appeals on his Church's behalf that the Father would guard the Church from the evil one (that's this Sunday's text)... the absolute victory of the 'Church militant confident in Christ' is the humble, beggarly, reverent joy of appealing to the God we *know* has overcome the world, the devil, and our sinful flesh. Luke again paints that picture this way in his second book, Acts, when – upon watching Jesus ascend into heaven, it records the disciples this way: "Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet... [and] all these with one accord (unity of doctrine) were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers." Devoting themselves to prayer in right doctrine... there is the sight and sound of your absolute victory... because you pray not to the one who's doctrine is fallible; you pray not to the one who's victory is tenuous. You pray to the One who has conquered in the fight, led captivity captive, and reigns upon the throne.

It's in that prayer and meditation upon right doctrine that one also gets a sense of "tasting" victory. Notice how the Scriptures even appeal to that "sense" for the faithful: The psalmist says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who *trusts* in Him." Yes, how sweet is our confidence in Christ Jesus, regardless of how the world against us rages. Again, Peter writes in his epistle, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk (right doctrine, reverent prayer, beggarly request for the divine things of heaven to be shared with the Church on earth), that by it you may grow up into salvation—*if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.*"

There it is again! But, doesn't that sort of beg the question: what does such goodness, such victory, taste like? What does it *mean* to taste spiritual and eternal victory?

Ironically, one might ask the demons!... who must have salivated over the thought that – with the death of the Christ – absolute victory was supposedly in reach!

The famous Christian author CS Lewis once wrote an entertaining meditation on what the sweet success of victory may taste like for the demons. In his satirical short story, "Screwtape Proposes a Toast," Lewis depicts the demon "Screwtape" giving a speech to the young up-and-coming demons at the annual dinner of the Tempters' Training College for Young Devils. After the feast, Screwtape rises and begins by bemoaning the fact that it's not so delicious to feast on human souls anymore because, not openly evil, mankind's faithlessness is more simple indifference and secularism. Screwtape laments (and, please indulge the rather lengthy quote),

"If our tormentors could [only] make them [taste] better than insipid. Oh, to get one's teeth again into a Farinata, a Henry VIII, or even a Hitler! There was real crackling there; something to crunch; a rage, an egotism, a cruelty only just less robust than our own. It put up a delicious resistance to being devoured. It warmed your innards when you'd got it down. Instead of this, what have we had tonight?"

There was a municipal authority with Graft sauce. But personally I could not detect in him the flavour of a really passionate and brutal avarice such as delighted one in the great tycoons of the last century. Was he not unmistakably a Little Man ... a grubby little nonentity who had *drifted* into corruption, only *just realizing* that he was corrupt, and chiefly because "everyone else did it"?

Then there was the lukewarm Casserole of Adulterers. Could you find in it any trace of a fully inflamed, defiant, rebellious, insatiable lust? I couldn't. They all tasted to me like undersexed morons who had blundered or trickled into the wrong beds in automatic response to sexy advertisements, or to make themselves feel "modern and emancipated", or to reassure themselves about their virility or their "normalcy," or even because they had nothing else to do. Frankly, to me who have tasted Messalina and Cassanova, they were nauseating.

The Unionist [Screwtape continues] stuffed with sedition was perhaps a shade better. He had done some real harm. He had, not quite unknowingly, worked for bloodshed, famine, and the extinction of liberty. Yes, in a *way*. But *what* a way!: He thought of those ultimate objectives so little. Toeing the party line, self-importance, and (above all) mere routine, were what *really* dominated his life. But now comes the point, [young devils]. Gastronomically, all this with man so willfully giving up on the Christian faith and no longer being the great villains of time, but now sort of the mushy easy-to-deceive and pull away from the faith flabbiness makes the feasting on human souls less enjoyable...

Notice how Screwtape finds less delicious the feasting on mindless secular souls, but then – in a twist – Screwtape says it is the satisfaction of *so many* that makes it so worth it. He goes on:

Is it not, in another and far more serious way, full of hope and promise? Consider... the mere **quantity**. The quality may be

wretched; but we never had souls (of a sort) in more **abundance.**”

You see how near ‘absolute victory’ the devils and demons must feel with our 21st century world. ... such promise! So close to absolute victory! ... until the news rings out anew and the devils are reminded that the crucified Christ came right to their feast, right to their own banquet, and proclaimed to them even before rising from the grave that He had won the victory. To be sure, even after the resurrection, and especially after the ascension of Christ, the faithless may all-too-indifferently serve as ‘feast for the demons.’ But, regarding Christ’s Church, the demons know utter famine and starvation.

For there remains this wondrous truth: the risen Christ has ascended on high with the promise that His Church benefits... that His Church has the final victory... that His Church tastes and sees that the Lord is good. And, thus, the joyous refrain is an experiential one known even now: “This is the *feast* of victory for our God!” Or, as the prophet Isaiah calls it, “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well redefined.” Or, as the psalmist says it, in what CS Lewis could depict a most wretched scene for that fictitious Screwtape, but – more truly, more historically and more eternally – is the greatest image of defeat for Satan and all the powers of darkness: the psalmist says of the Lord, his Shepherd, “He preparast a table before me in the presence of mine enemies... my cup runneth over.” There’s the feast of victory...

and it's yours: "Receive and eat, this is my body; Receive and drink from the cup of salvation, this is my blood... for you... to forgive you your sins and strengthen you *unto life everlasting*." The body and blood of the risen Christ, the glorious Christ, the victorious Christ. That is the taste of victory, a taste unknown to the faithless world who serves only its belly and its immediate satisfaction and thereby fattens itself up to be feasted on by the devils. But, you, dear children of God – you know a banquet better than Canaan's land flowing with milk and honey, an altar at which (Hebrews says) those who serve the old ways have no right to eat... You know the Table of the Lord, the marriage banquet, the feast of victory... with the bread and wine of heaven, the body and blood of the ascended Christ, the meal beyond compare.

And thus, in humble reverence of the wondrous news that Christ has completed his course and has begun his reign, what joy is ours to know that such truth is not some distant out-of-reach triumph, but even now - this very hour - it is ours to share in this absolute victory of our God.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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