

'LIFE' WITH CHRIST

Articles of Comfort and Blessings Offered to the Reader

In this issue Father Matta sheds light on verses taken from John 14, which are read on the first hour of Friday of the Holy Week (known in Coptic as Paraskeve). Note that the quotations are taken from the New International Version, if not otherwise mentioned.

Volume Two

Chapter 27

"Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves."

John 14:10-11

CHRIST WAS AMAZED when the disciples asked to see the Father, because the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. When the Son speaks or acts, it is the Father who is speaking or acting, because the unity between the Father and the Son was the unity of one being, one expression and one work. This perplexed the disciples because they did not yet know that the Father and Son are one God in speech and action. What one does is done by the other at the same time with no difference in degree of presence or time. The unity is divine, above any description or definition, so when the disciples saw the Son they saw the Father in him also, with both equally present in space and time. This is the divine unity which is above the mental capacity of man, and so it requires faith alone.

It is clear that the words of Christ are the words of God, and the work of Christ is the work of God. This raises the position of faith and greatly increases its value. This is the miracle of divinity and the miracle of the age. It makes our faith in Christ and the Father faith in the one God. When Christ completed the mission of redemption assigned to him by the Father, he prepared to go to the Father, leaving the disciples in the hands of the Father and in his care. The work of the Son was in obedience to the Father. Christ had no conflicting will or desire, for his was the will and desire of the Father. So the Father rejoiced in the Son's completion of obedience, which was credited to humanity's account. From the perspective of its work accomplished and its purpose, the cross was fundamentally the cross of man. The cross was the cross by the will of God and the obedience of the Son, so when Christ gives his true and practical command to "take up

your cross and follow me,"¹ it is man who benefits because of the divine mystery within it, and it is added in its entirety to the account of a sinner turning back to God. So the cross is our faith, our truth, our joy, our strength, our salvation and our glory, until death and beyond.²

In the world there is nothing that can fill the void within man and prepare him for eternal life except the cross. Though in the cross there is suffering, hardship and persecution in the world, with God it is glory, love, adoption, election and the comfort of an eternal home. All of this is not bound by time as it is in the world, rather, it exists continually and eternally, forever multiplying within itself, never ending, decreasing or changing, but going from glory to glory without end.

Among the works, sayings and commandments of Christ, what we find most amazing is that the glories of heaven which he prepared for us and will soon come to take us there, is that he did not place on man any burdens or demands in order to receive it. What he does ask is faith from a sincere heart and true hope that is not shaken. Those who preceded us are witnesses to this, and the Holy Spirit testifies of Christ and the divine truth. From heaven he pours upon the evangelist strength and a good testimony in their proper time, which is credited to man as righteousness freely given to all who suffer as a result of testimony or loss. Evangelism on earth wins a heavenly inheritance of the riches of Christ that cannot be measured.

July 27, 2005

¹ See Luke 9:23.

² See Gal 6:14.

Chapter 28

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

John 14:27

THE PEACE OF CHRIST is given by Christ from his heart; in fact, from the depths of his peaceful nature. Christ gracefully gives life, which is the essence of peace that is beyond mental comprehension. Peace is the nature of Christ, from which springs peace and upon which the world continues. From the depths of his being, from the pulse of his life, Christ draws his peace. So peace is his nature; it is not introduced from outside him. The peace in heaven is from the overflow of his nature, and this is why when Christ was born the hosts of heaven cried out that peace had come to earth.¹ The earth was cursed because of Adam's sin and his departure from the presence of God, and peace disappeared from the earth and all creation. Animals began to struggle and groan under the weight of sin which afflicted them, and from nature itself peace disappeared and the elements began to clamor. The rule of peace created it, but because

¹ See Luke 2:14.

of Adam this peace abandoned it, so Adam became exposed to the beasts and the cacophony of nature. The earth began to see waves of volcanoes and earthquakes, and even the heavens lost their balance between hot and cold, harming man in their violent changes. So man began to hide in caves and crevices, as if nature was baring its teeth to the lord of creation to which it was subject. Man was freed to live in exile on the earth, chased by the beasts of the wilderness and the parched creation, silent and unaware of the calamities from which he escapes; all the calamities follow him, he being unaware they are because of him.

Finally, God had compassion on his creation and sent his only Son to firmly establish the peace of God on earth, to return to Adam his respectability and authority over creation, to rebuke the winds and violent storms that began again to show themselves as man was drowning in his sins. Christ demonstrates a fundamental difference between his peace and the peace which the world stingily gives with its right hand to take again with its left. The world returned to the sovereignty of Satan leading to the rule of sin. Here Christ is issuing an alert that his peace which he gives and leaves with his beloved is unlike the peace of the world, which is called peace but in fact is spears pointed at sinful man, who is unaware of their source. The world may appear at peace but its real self is a terrifying and murderous void that besieges man wherever he goes.

One of the most beautiful descriptions of Christ's peace is that it is a gift given to his beloved. He gives it to them as an inheritance that is pleasing to God and a startling commemoration of his love and intimacy which he left to the world as the greatest heavenly inheritance and a living and life-giving reminder of his presence which never fails on behalf of his beloved: "I will not leave you as orphans"² and "surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."³ This is the peace which he never ceases to give his intimate friends and chosen ones.

The peace of Christ removes trouble and anxiety from hearts, for it is the cure of divine love which heals and dresses the wounds of man. He strengthens his heart in the face of the storms of the world and the schemes of the enemy which he stirs up in hearts to shake the world and fill it with trouble in order to take possession of the fearful and trembling. Satan provokes the strongest enemy against him, fear of things not there, terror by which he hunts the hearts of his captives in the world of darkness, in which he reigns, roaming in search of a man to swallow with his terrifying, yet baseless, schemes.⁴ The terrors of the enemy are all illusions with no connection to the nature of man: "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened."⁵

May the peace of Christ fill the hearts of his children.

July 27, 2005

² John 14:18.

³ Matt 28:20.

⁴ See 1 Pet 5:8.

⁵ 1 Pet 3:14.

Chapter 29

"I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you,
I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

John 14:2-3

FOR THE FIRST TIME Christ declares to us here that he is preparing a place for us in heaven, just as Christ the Word from heaven in the embrace of the Father descended to prepare for God a place on earth. It was an event that inspires wonder, that the inhabitant of heaven would come to live on earth. It amazed all in heaven and earth. The Son the Word chose to seek a safe and holy place in which to descend, and so we know he chose the Holy Virgin Mary, to be born of her by the Holy Spirit. In line with the humility of the Son he was born in a cow's manger, which was a brilliant reconciliation of animals that were cursed through Adam and subjected also to corruption. The birth of Christ in a cow's manger provides a banner for our message: He is meek and humble. Yet, it was not an easy thing for Christ to find a place to be born.

Christ went to heaven after he completed the message of redemption, and he reconciled man to God.¹ He completed the salvation for which he descended and became a stranger on earth. This is why Christ came, to do the work of salvation for human beings whom he chose, united to him and granted them a share and an inheritance with him in heaven. He went first to prepare a place for them until he comes and takes them to be with him.

Heaven is the homeland of the heavenly, and earth of the earthly. Yet, because Christ completed his salvation on earth, man who was redeemed by the blood of Christ won adoption, sanctification and election and was put on the level of the heavenly because he was united with the Son and became one with him. The strangest thing of all is that the heavenly Father blessed the work of the Son and extended his fatherly embrace to the creation of the new man. He accepted man who is made holy by the blood, and he welcomed him to make his favorite place that of standing in a chorus before the Holy Father. He enjoys the pleasure and love of the Father who has counted man who has believed in Christ as chosen by God before time and the world began. So it was reserved for redeemed man before time began to receive sonship from God, to stand blameless before him in love, in the joy of the will of the Father.² It is an election and appointment before all time, ages past and the creation of the world. It is the pleasure of the Father that the location or place where man settles in heaven is the place prepared from eternity past and before the creation of the world.

The time has come for Christ the Son of God to inaugurate the first choruses before the Father. This is the place Christ went to prepare for them and which the Father receives and welcomes.

¹ See Rom 5:10, 2 Cor 5:19.

² See Eph 1:3-5.

What brings joy and happiness to man's heart is that we will not be alone before God, rather, as the redeemed of the Lord, "for we are members of his body."³ We share the position, honor and glory of Christ, for he gave us his glory to be one in him in a chosen and justified eternal fellowship in which our glory is in the hope of the glory of Christ.⁴ Christ also glories in us as his flock whom he chose out of the world, justified and sanctified and gave them of his Spirit and so they became one in him.

The place where he chose for us to be with him is in the honor of the Father, for the Son does not exist by himself, but he and the Father are one. In the great humility of Christ, he presents us to his Father as the labor of his hands, the work of his redemption on the cross, so the Father receives us to be one in him.

July 27, 2005

³ Eph 5:30.

⁴ See Rom 5:2.

St Isaac the Syrian

Fasting, a Weapon Forged by God

Fasting was the commandment that was given to our nature in the beginning to protect it with respect to the tasting of food, and in this point the progenitor of our substance fell. There, however, where the first defeat was suffered, the ascetic strugglers make their beginning in the fear of God as they start to keep His laws. And the Savior also, when He manifested Himself to the world in the Jordan, began at this point. For after His baptism the Spirit led Him into the wilderness and He fasted for forty days and forty nights. Likewise all who set out to follow in His footsteps make the beginning of their struggle upon this foundation. For this is a weapon forged by God, and who shall escape blame if he neglects it? And if the Lawgiver Himself fasts, who among those who keep the law has no need of fasting? ... When the devil, that foe and tyrant, sees a man bearing this weapon, he is straightway frightened and he recollects and considers that defeat which he suffered in the wilderness at the hands of the Savior; at once his strength is shattered and the very sight of this weapon, given us by our Commander-in-chief, burns him.

Ascetical Homilies, 37 (Massachusetts, 1984, p 172).

The Monastery of St Macarius

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