

'IT IS EXPEDIENT THAT I GO'

(LAST SERMON PREACHED BY THE VERY REV. VINCENT McNABB, O.P.,  
S.T.M., AT ST. DOMINIC'S PRIORY, LONDON, N.W.5, ON SUNDAY,  
FOURTH AFTER EASTER, MAY 23, 1943, AT 7 P.M.)

The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St. John, Chapter the sixteenth (xvi, 6-11).

6. . . . *Because I have spoken these things to you, sorrow hath filled your heart.*

7. *But I tell you the truth: it is expedient to you that I go: for if I go not, the Paraclete will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.*

8. *And when He is come, He will convince the world of sin, and of justice, and of judgment.*

9. *Of sin: because they believed not in Me.*

10. *And of justice: because I go to the Father; and you shall see me no longer.*

11. *And of judgment: because the prince of this world is already judged.*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

In God's intimate dealings with those he loves, nothing is more common than that great game of seeming to go away. Of course once God loves a soul, he never really goes away. The soul may go away from him. And if he seems to go away, he never goes far from the soul, but rather closer and closer to it, and hides himself as the sun might hide itself behind a cloud. Sometimes of course the soul that loves God, with a love begotten of perfect faith, is given by God certain glimpses of him. Such a soul sees the truth of God; such a soul sees the beauty of God as it had never seen it before. Then perhaps all that suddenly goes away. The mind is left, as it were, not just in a cloudless but in a sunless sky. The sun has gone. It is now night in the mind. They speak of that as the dark night of the soul in the one who, in a few hours before, seemed to be living in all the certitude of the beatific vision.

The soul often begins to accuse itself as if the withdrawal of God were a punishment on the soul for some secret sin. Of course it is no punishment at all, but rather a further intimacy of God with the mind of man. For in this, as in other dealings, God never with-

draws his presence from those he loves, but only in the mode he loves; and the last mode is the better.

Or the soul has been given by God some sip of joy, some sip of joy that has almost gladdened its heart to the point of inebriation. Indeed, the mystics speak of the soul's being drunk with God. Then again, suddenly joy is drained from the soul and some awful draught of sorrow comes upon it which the mystics hardly know how to express. There is loneliness in the midst of many; fear where there seems no foe. But, as you know, joy is a very dangerous gift of God because joy can be sought for its own sake. We are safer with sorrow, because, though many will seek joy for its own sake, no man, I presume, has ever sought sorrow for the sake of sorrow. God is always inviting the soul to safety in union with him. And all his leadership is towards the heights; and all his invitations are to the banquet of his divine love.

If it is with that great game of seeming to go away that God plays with the individual, he seems also to play it with the Church and with mankind that he loves so much, loves unto death.

Some thousands of years previous to his coming, a thousand gifts were given to those whom he was preparing to be the guardian of his further mercies; then Nazareth, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the Cross. There were some three years of showing himself to the mind and heart of man. Then as one swiftly opens and withdraws a curtain, that vision absolutely fled. What a shock did those get like Peter and John, who were childlike in their love of him, that they scrambled like children from the boat to the water to be at his feet! What a shock when they knew they were to lose him, never to see him again, never to hear his voice, never to have the joy of his salutation, of meeting him casually as he went here and there! How could he say to them: 'It is expedient to you that I go'? How could there be anything better than the presence of Jesus Christ, who so won his way into the heart of mankind that two disciples walking along the way with him invited him to join with them and uttered what we all feel and utter now, 'Stay with us now; the evening is closing in'? We might say: 'Stay with us. When thou goest, it will be night.' Yet peremptorily, one might almost say unfeelingly, he said: 'It is expedient to you that I go.'

Ah, my beloved Saviour, thou art again playing thy great game of Hide-and-Seek; of going and seeming to go, when thou goest simply deeper into our mind and heart.

And he told them what seemed almost to contradict what he had already said. He told them, in a sense, that he would go and not go. He had said he would never go and leave them. Now this

bodily presence, with its certitude and consolation—with its certitude which seemed to make faith unnecessary; with its consolation which seemed almost more than a foretaste of heaven—was to be at an end, the reason being that he was to change one mode of his presence, because he is always present, into a new and higher and more intimate one.

He had not come down into the world just for you and me, but for all men. We want of course, in our common love, to be all one great brotherhood. Outside Jesus Christ there is no firm foundation for the brotherhood of man, for he, as man, has become our Brother. The great boons and blessings he had brought into the world were not meant just for that corner of the earth, for that little band of men, for that group of women that stood round the Cross. They were meant for the world. Whilst he was in the flesh and had all the limitations of that flesh, he could only speak to that little corner of the world. In his great love of us, he had planned that his continual Presence should bring him to the whole of mankind. Hence, you have him saying: 'I will send my Spirit. My bodily presence, my fleshly appearances will be at an end. And I will send my Spirit. He will have a great work. He will do what I tell him. He will be my Spirit which I, in my love, send as the Spirit of Love.'

And what does that Spirit do? He forms the Church. It is unique, my dear brethren, that our Lord formed a Church. No one else has done that. He organised a Church, not just a building, not just a geographical centre, but a group of men; just as a school is not a building, but a master and pupils. No one else had attempted to organise something that would last after death and carry on to the world all he wanted it to know. And after a thousand years or so, we find his plan, in making that Church, was as suited to the year in which I am speaking and you are hearing, as it was for the first day. Nothing is more suited and more needed in the times in which we live than the Church of God. It can be ignored by mankind but only to mankind's hurt.

He said the Spirit in that Church would do three things. They are very simple.

It would tell man that he could lower himself by *sin*. There was such a thing as *sin*. 'Sin whereby they have not believed in me.' If they do not believe in the God above them, and do not therefore seek what is above them, it seems simple to think that they will seek the things beneath them.

Some of those who have intimate knowledge of the devil's working, in these our own days, have said that the devil always tries to

make those intimate with him commit suicide. These intimates are those who, so to say, have adored him. I wonder if the poor modern world, in perhaps unconscious worship of Satan, is not being led by him into suicide? When one thinks of the young lives wasted and families torn up and little hope perhaps for the future, one wonders whether that master of intrigue and lies, the devil, is not pushing mankind to the brink of suicide.

But there are those in the world that know that nothing beneath man can perfect him, for perfection is of itself above him. Men can be perfected only by that which is above. Hence in the world to-day, the Church which is almost unique in speaking of sin, is also speaking of what here is called *justice* and which we can call holiness. He will tell the world of holiness. The Church will not just speak to the world of sin. Here, round this church, are those tribunals where you learn, learn what sin is by confessing that this or the other act of yours was sin. What a lesson! And there at the altar rails, the Church teaches you holiness.

There are two kinds of sacraments, the sacraments of the dead and the sacraments of the living. The sacraments of the dead raise the dead to life, lift them up. That great sacrament of the living raises life up to the perfect life by the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

So that it was expedient for them that he went. Otherwise those great truths, a sense of sin and the possibility of union with God, a union so close that he expresses it as eating him, would not have been realised. All that is now continued by his love to mankind over the world not in this or the other village, but it might be almost in every village of every country, small and great—the boons of Jesus Christ are multiplied.

The Holy Ghost, of course, through the Church will speak to the world of *judgment*—whether we shall stand on the right hand with the sheep, or on the left hand with the goats. How good it is for mankind to know there is a judgment! Otherwise men might take themselves to be the ultimate judges of the things they think and do; as if the things they think and act could ever change a moral law!

You and I are in the Church. Some of us are grateful to God that we were within that Church within almost a few hours of being born. And we have lived long years in that Church and never with a sense of disappointment, save at our own failures. It has been everything to us. It has been Christ to us. All its great sacraments that we have received have been instituted by him with such a fitness for us that sometimes we wondered if they had not been made espe-

cially for us, and its organisation, God's special mercy to us. How we should thank God that he instituted Peter as a Rock on which his Church is built, and the successors of St. Peter to carry on that work of the Church, and for the bishops and clergy. I speak, not as one of them and the most unworthy, but as one who, from childhood, has received those mercies and as one of a family who stood morning by morning at the altar. I will not say, my dear brethren, that it is a great duty to have continued loyally to the Church; it is a privilege.

Ah! beloved Master and Lover of my soul, sometimes I sorrow a little that thou didst withdraw thy presence and that no more thou walkest beside the Sea of Galilee; that no longer thou didst walk with thy chosen Twelve through the wheatfield. Then I know that that which I have is better. Now I know what a privilege it was for Magdalen to be told to leave thy feet in order to do thy will and work; for all my life should be thy will, and all thy will is thy work.

Grant me, O Saviour and Guide of my soul, always to do thy will how long soever it may be thy will that I should have strength to do it and to do thy work, for thy work is first of all to love thee, and then to love, almost more than thyself, after thy pattern, my neighbour whom thou didst love to the shedding of thy blood.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.