

6.23.2024 Trinity 4 (Romans 8:18-23)

As children, many of us learn some of the basic facts about the miraculous process by which a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly. The story usually begins with a very hungry caterpillar hatching from an egg. The caterpillar stuffs itself with leaves, growing plumper and longer through a series of molts in which it sheds its skin, until one day, the caterpillar stops eating, hangs upside down from a twig or leaf, and molts into a shiny chrysalis. Within this protective cocoon, the caterpillar is radically transformed through a process by which the caterpillar digests itself, releasing enzymes to dissolve all of its tissues. In fact, if you were to cut open a cocoon or chrysalis at just the right time, caterpillar soup would ooze out, but this ooze isn't just a soupy mess. Certain highly organized groups of cells survive the digestive process and turn this soup into eyes, wings, antennae, numerous other structures, and, at just the right time, a butterfly emerges (Ferris Jabr, *Scientific American*).

Along this line, there's a story about a young boy who came across one of these cocoons, and decided to bring it home with him. As he examined what he'd found, the boy noticed that in this stage of its development, the butterfly had only managed to make a small hole in the chrysalis, and as he watched it over the course of the next several hours, what he saw, from his limited perspective, was a little insect struggling unsuccessfully to break free from its confinement. It seemed to him as if the butterfly was just too big, and would never be able to fit through that small opening.

The boy wanted to help the butterfly, to ease its heavy burden, and so he took a small pair of scissors and made a slit in the cocoon. The butterfly immediately emerged, but its body was still underdeveloped, and its wings were small and crumpled. The boy was trying to help, but his actions had actually cut short the final, crucial stage in the development of this insect in which it pushes fluid from its swollen body into its wings, helping them to expand and unfold properly. The boy expected the butterfly to emerge and take flight, but without going through the difficult process of freeing itself from the chrysalis, it could only drag its small, weak body along the ground. It was completely incapable of flying, and would remain that way for the rest of its life.

From the moment a caterpillar hatches from an egg, its life is a struggle, a struggle that turns the insect into caterpillar soup, a struggle that transforms this soup into the beautiful butterfly that God created it to be, and while no analogy is perfect, perhaps this mental picture of the difficult path a caterpillar must walk in order to eventually take flight helps us better understand the way our own journey through this transient life is meant to be a means of transformation, a way in which we are becoming all that God created us to be.

Like the butterfly, that is made stronger by the struggle, the butterfly that's being prepared for the glory of flight through the trials of life, so often it is in and through suffering that we are prepared for heaven. St. Paul, who suffered in unimaginable ways for the sake of Christ and His Gospel, spoke about suffering in that way. In a letter to the Corinthians he told us that these "*light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*" (2 Corinthians 4:17). St. Paul could refer to his own experience of suffering hunger and thirst, cold and nakedness, shipwreck and being beaten with rods (2 Corinthians 11:25-30), as *light and momentary troubles* because his focus was on eternity. St. Paul had his heart, soul, and mind firmly set on the glory of "*things above,*" not on the difficulty of "*things on the earth*" (Colossians 3:2).

Listen to the way his eternal focus is revealed in this verse from today's Epistle, in which Paul wrote, "*I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*" (Romans 8:18). According to St. Paul (the human author of these words), and more importantly according to God (the Divine Author), those things we suffer here and now cannot be compared with the glory of heaven. You can't compare finite suffering to eternal glory. These *light and momentary troubles* are limited to space, time, and matter. They will certainly come to an end, but the eternal glory they're achieving for us is a glory that transcends such finite limits, a glory that far outweighs them all, a glory which, again, according to God, *shall be revealed in us*.

Clearly, God allows some measure of suffering on this earth, He permits temporary suffering, but only because He redeems these *light and momentary*

troubles in such a way that His glory, the eternal glory of God, is revealed in us. This thought brings to mind God's promise that all things work together for our good, and when you read the words come after that promise, you discover "*the good*" that God is working out for us. St. Paul wrote, "*And we know that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son...*" (Romans 8:28-29).

In other words, God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him, and that good is that we would be conformed to the glorious image of His Son. In the midst of suffering we may feel like the only thing that will come out of our trials is caterpillar soup, but God intends to use these trials to transform us, to conform us *to the image of His Son*, our Lord. Yes, when we're experiencing hardship we may feel as if it's too much to bear, and we may ask God to quickly rescue us, to cut open this cocoon of suffering and set us free, but God in His infinite wisdom, and from His eternal perspective, is not so short-sighted. He knows better. He knows that these things are working toward a glorious outcome, and therefore God doesn't always immediately relieve our suffering, because His chief desire is not our momentary comfort. His desire is our eternal glory, specifically, the glory of His Son revealed in us.

No analogy is perfect, but upon reflecting on the transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly, I was reminded of a similar analogy found in Mere Christianity. It was there that C.S. Lewis wrote, "God became man to turn creatures into sons (and daughters), not simply to produce better persons of the old kind but to produce a new kind of person. It is not like teaching a horse to jump better and better but like turning a horse into a winged creature. Of course, once it has got its wings, it will soar over fences which could never have been jumped and thus beat the natural horse at its own game. But there may be a period, while the wings are just beginning to grow, when it cannot do so: and at that stage the lumps on the shoulders - no one could tell by looking at them that they are going to be wings - may even give it an awkward appearance."

God became man to turn creatures into sons and daughters, and He uses all things, even hard things, to produce this new kind of person. The world may

view suffering as producing nothing more than caterpillar soup, but Scripture tells us that Christians “*rejoice in our suffering*” (Romans 5:3) because we know that like the caterpillar’s true purpose is to become a butterfly, our purpose, the end that God is leading us toward is to be like Him. *Conformed to the image of His Son*, not “better persons of the old kind,” but a “*new creation*” in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

By the grace of God may we approach the *sufferings of this present time*, these *light and momentary troubles* that will certainly come to an end, as opportunities to become new persons, to use Lewis’ words, “winged creatures,” sons and daughters of God who reveal His eternal glory to the world He gave the life of His Son to save.