



The Bonfire of the Branches Without Jesus

Intimacy With Jesus Is Like A Vine and a Branch (John 15:1-8)

Jesus loved to use the images of daily life to illustrate his Gospel. In this Last supper discourse, the lesson drawn from grape farming is a case in point. Grape farmers planted their vines on terraced slopes above their grain fields. In those cooler highlands they could count on heavy dewfall even in the dry summer months. They planted the vines in rows about eight feet apart, giving them plenty growing space as well as room for the workers to move through them.

Every spring the farmers pruned the vines. “When the flowering is ended, and the blooms are succeeded by ripening grapes, Then comes the cutting of the branches with pruning hooks and the discarding of the lopped-off shoots” (Isaiah 18:5). The workers walked through the rows, pausing at each vine to cut off the less productive branches with a small knife. They brought the piles of branches to a safe area where they were burned. The living branches that were heavy with prospective fruit were propped up with forked sticks. Lastly, the farmers gently loosened the ground around the vines with a hoe and scraped away any weeds. After that they waited while mother nature matured the small clusters of fruit which swelled and ripened under the hot summer sun. At harvest time the workers lived in makeshift shelters by the vineyards to guard them.

Participants at a Passover meal would have drunk four ceremonial cups of wine. At the Last Supper the third cup of wine was transformed sacramentally by Jesus into his Blood. The drinking of the Sacramental Wine would have been a perfect lead-in to his comments about the vine and the branches. Images of vines, grapes, and wine were among the most pleasant in their minds since they spoke of fruitfulness, color, joyful celebration, and warm hearts.

Often they praised God for “producing bread from the earth, and wine to gladden men’s hearts” (Psalm 104:15).

When Jesus began to talk about vine farming he induced a mellow mood that matched the progress of the meal and his words about peace as well as his attempts to keep them from being anxious or afraid.

He would have prompted in their minds the many wine songs they had chanted, the laughter of the harvesters, the village dances that accompanied the festivals of the wine harvests. In their imaginations they would have seen again the bonfires at night where the pruned branches lit up the sky.

Jesus chose the image to illumine the mystery of his intimacy with them. They had just drunk of the sacred cup of sacramental wine – his precious Blood. The setting and their experience lent themselves perfectly to Christ's words: "I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower" (verse 1). In response to Philip's request, Jesus had helped them to experience the presence and availability of the Father at that very meal. The Father is the vine grower and Jesus is the vine.

Jesus pressed the truth about his relationship to them in terms of intimacy He and they were more than acquaintances. They were as close to each other as a vine is to a branch. The vine is the life-giver. The branch is the life-receiver. They had just drunk of his very Blood, another name for life. They must realize that their access to divine Life and Love is through Jesus. They may try to save themselves by using their own wits, intelligence, physical energy, political connections, family wealth, membership in the patriarchal religion, or a dozen other means. None of it will work. Only intimacy with Jesus will benefit them. "I am the vine, you are the branches" (verse 5).

As the life-giving juice of the vine pours into a branch causing a flower to bloom and a small fruit to appear, so does the transforming juice of Christ's love and grace pour into them to make them courageous, committed and productive disciples. "Without me, you can do nothing" (verse 5). If they withdraw from Jesus as a person, cease to listen to his word, and depart from communing with him in the Eucharist, they will become the fruitless branches that will be knifed off the vine and thrown onto a bonfire.

Every age tempts Christians to try some other way to find happiness and freedom without Jesus. In our own time some people withdraw from Eucharist for ideological reasons. Others prefer the writings of secular wisdom to the Gospel teachings of Jesus. Some teach that Jesus is not the only One by whom we shall be saved, despite the biblical teaching, "Nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved" (Acts 4:12). Some write books and articles about Christianity, yet never even mention the name of Jesus, a name that means "Savior." These approaches will lead such people to become branches disconnected from the Vine that is Jesus Christ. Lacking intimacy with Jesus, they risk being cut off and thrown into the bonfire.

The bonfire is a spiritual burnout in this life and hell in the next. The branches of our lives dry up in the desert without love. We may have sought vitality in the quest for money, sex, and power, which gave us momentary relief from inner pain.

We could have let the force which makes flowers grow and planets spin course through our lives. Through Jesus, the Word, all things were made. All reality lives, moves and has its being in him.

The river of his creative force could stream through our lives. We may choose to be branches on his vine or go off on our own. Should we decide to walk alone, we will head for the bonfire.

Christian spirituality centers on Christ. He is the truth that we speak, the way we walk, the love we show to others. The agricultural symbol of the vine and branches refers to a psychological and spiritual relationship with Jesus. Branches and vines must stay together if there is to be a grape harvest. The image evokes the connections seen in all friendships and the pursuit of love. People who want to be friends must work on their friendships. Spouses who hope to stay together must stay in touch with each other.

We must work on our friendship with Christ if we expect to be effective Christians. The pledge to be Christ's friend, begun in baptism, must be a lifelong project. Someone has said, "If I don't mend my friendships and mind my love relationships, I shall soon be without friends or lovers." Neither love nor friendship can be taken for granted.

Friendship with Jesus is no different. We must think of him. We must try to be near him. We must allow the give and take that characterizes any relationship. Christ the vine and the Christian branch must stick together. The flow of life and love between branch and vine leads to the wine of Christian love that cheers the heart of God, others, and self.

The fact pace of today's life causes many people to forget the time needed to have a vital relationship which needs constant attention. Doing things for one another is not enough. Persons are more important than things. Merely being together will not suffice. Even branches still on the vine dry up and die. Physical presence is a start but more is needed. There must be intimacy between the persons, a sharing of oneself with the other, be that a spouse, a relative, a friend – or Jesus. The process is the same. So long as the flow of meaning, care and concern occurs, the relationship will be health and growth will happen.

There is a significant difference, however, when the relationship is between Jesus and us. The process is similar to those we have with spouses, relatives, and friends. But when our partner is Jesus the life-giver, the flow of vitality that comes from him to us is qualitatively superior to any love we would ever receive from anyone else.

When we relate to him, we touch the life-force itself. We encounter a creativity that makes us new, a forgiveness that clarifies our whole inner life, a dynamism that releases interior energies we never knew existed within us. We become pure, not just by the absence of the darkness of evil, but by the presence of a light that shows us how all our parts fit together in harmony. Our will. Our emotions. Our minds. Our bodies.

Affected by his Love, our inner disorder gives way to a friendly union of all our faculties. This, too, takes time. But it is a process which no other love relationship can achieve. In Jesus, we become centers of peace for all those we meet.

You Are My Friends (John 15:9-17)

In case the apostles do not appreciate the real meaning of the vine image, Jesus proceeded to talk about love. Jesus said the kind of love the Father has for him is the same kind he has for them – and us as well. He immediately connected love with obedience, a Gospel value that seems out of fashion today, but has always been a bit unfashionable even in the time of the apostles, not to mention the Garden of Eden. Christ mentioned love in the same breath as obedience to his commandments. Lest we think we are the only ones doing the obeying, he added that our obedience should be like his own obedience to his Father's commandments.

For a variety of reasons obedience has had a bad press in our times. Horror stories about the misuse of authority have given obedience a terrible name. The Nazi war trials gave us a spectacle of brutal murderers excusing their crimes under the guise of obedience. "I was simply following orders and I turned the gas on the women and children." Bruised adults today often attribute their wrecked psyches to abusive parents who forced them to obey, using terror and fear to obtain submission. Even religion has been misused when harsh authority extracted obedience for unworthy purposes. Worst of all has been the seventy-year record of Marxist-Communism which has enslaved the wills of millions of people and made them obey or else suffer death or imprisonment.

Nevertheless, even though obedience has been debased by such hateful usage, it remains a scriptural value. Just because various kinds of authority – parental, political, military, religious – have sometimes wrongfully imposed unjust obedience, does not excuse us from practicing true, Christian obedience. Such evil usage simply challenges us to rehabilitate obedience in the light of Christ's example and teachings. Jesus told the apostles that he obeyed his Father's commandments. Paul reminded the Philippians of just how deep was the obedience of Jesus. "He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8).

Jesus established love as the context for his remark about obedience. The condition for scriptural obedience is love. "If one loves, then one obeys. Love, however, is expected from both partners to the experience. Ideally, the commander should love the commanded. Conversely, the obeyer should love the commander. This is love in the form of trust, not fear. Between adults this exchange should take place in a perspective of quality, respect for the dignity of those engaged. When we have a case of lovers, this is no problem. Lovers easily say, "Your wish is my command." Obedience here is a joy, not a burden.

But when the exchange is between one who is officially "superior" to another, the interaction is trickier.

The one who has “rank” should not view the obeyer as inferior in terms of humanity and personhood. Our world is full of bosses. Public administration in all of its forms can probably happen in no other way. But the bosses should not be bossy. And they certainly should not oppress, intimidate, and humiliate those responsible to them in order to enforce obedience. At the same time, the obeyers should act responsibly, with trust and respect and openness.

Obviously, this is a complex topic and we cannot explore the full variety of commander-obeyer relationships and how to do it best. All we wish to insist on is that life requires a proper form of authority and a suitable response of obedience. Jesus situated his “obedience” talk in the context of love and friendship. He promised his apostles that he would love them in the greatest way he knew how. He would lay down his life for them, just as a shepherd risks his life for his flock.

He had no intention of treating them as inferiors. “I have called you friends” (verse 15). He loved them and treated them as his loved ones. He chose them. He did not pick them because they were good. His choice elevated them to a goodness they had not known before. He did not love them because they were so loveable. It was his love that made them loveable.

In religious language this is the mystery of grace. God finds us as sinners, basically unlovable, prone to evil, lost, mired in our own darkneses. His grace touches us and turns us into his beloved. In child talk, the frog becomes a prince, the ugly duckling becomes a swan. We have the potential to undergo this remarkable transformation from slaves of sin to friends of God. Divine Love makes us loveable.

Return then to the subject of obedience. Its root meaning comes from the Latin “to hear and respond.” When Jesus says to us, “I choose you to be a friend,” we have the option to say yes or no. When we say “yes,” we are obeying with love and trust. This is creative and redemptive obedience which opens us to being true, beautiful, loveable and one with God, Keeping Christ’s commandments in this perspective only deepens the friendship which has begun.

On the Other Hand – The World’s Hatred for Christians (John 15:18-27)

By this point the apostles could hardly have felt better about themselves. The glow of love had seized their hearts. Peace had settled the noise of their inner selves. The warmth of this celebratory meal had never made them feel so comfortable before. The Master had acknowledged clearly that they were deep friends of his. Fear had fled. Anxiety had subsided. Already a genial complacency had soothed them. They, the branches felt a health flow of life from the vine, Jesus.

Ever the realist, Jesus decided they were strong enough now to receive a jolt. They suspected he was in some kind of danger. They did not realize that a lifetime of danger lay ahead of them. Jesus stripped them of any illusions about their future. The world would hate them and kill them and persecute them just as it planned to do to him. The friends of Jesus would suffer just as he did. Their love bond with him would include the cross. He would suffer and die tomorrow. They would suffer and die soon enough.

The cause was identical – the world that hates the Father the world that hates the Son, and world that hates real Christians. The hatred arises from commitment to evil and sin. The world's hatred refuses to accept salvation from sin, because it does not want to give up evil. It prefers its own hatred to the possibility of divine love and redemption.

The center of the world's opposition is in its will, the core of choice. Since it will not make the option for love, it chooses hatred instead and wreaks its vengeance on those who have chosen Jesus and Love. Disobedience, refusal to hear and respond to Christ's invitation to a life of love and moral virtue is the world's choice. Because the friends of Jesus will witness to his person and message, they will suffer at the hands of those who hate God and prefer evil.

The Acts of the Apostles and the Book of Revelation amply prove that Jesus' words on that Holy Night would come true. Church history ever since has abundant testimony about the persecution of the friends of Jesus. The most powerful ideology of the twentieth century, Marxist-Communism, was based upon a militant atheism that systematically tried to destroy the friends of Jesus.

In the free societies of the industrial nations there is a noticeable hostility to Christianity. Christians who defend the right of the unborn are branded as an outcast fringe who must be co-opted and suppressed. Christians who question the sexual freedoms of the culture as destructive of family life are ridiculed. Christians who stand up for economic justice for the poor are sidetracked by the super-moneyed class. Christians who plead for peace are considered strange and even a threat. Christians who say that there is such a thing as truth are reviled by the relativists. Christians who assert that God must have a place in civil law and culture are fought against as though it was they who were a threat to society and culture.

“If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first” (verse 18). All religious persecutions ultimately fail and produce a stronger Christianity than he one they tried to destroy. The Holy Spirit abides with the church and causes the courage so evident in the friends of Jesus. The world hates. Christians love. Church history shows that Christian love ultimately wins the battles.

Breathe on Us, Breath of God

The Divine Radiance of the Spirit's Light (John 16:1-15)

A great shadow brooded over the Last Supper when Jesus outlined the sufferings the apostles would endure. His sobering words deflated them and caused them a mixture of fear and sadness.

They felt dislocated when he predicted they would be expelled from the synagogues, those holy places where they absorbed the patriarchal faith, felt a spiritual bond with their families and friends, and acquired a sense of religious identity.

They shuddered at the harsh vision he painted for them when he told them they could anticipate being killed because of their commitment to his Gospel. And the one who would kill them would believe they were virtually worshiping God in the process. At the very meal where their hearts had bounded with spiritual joy, the prospect of life-threatening situations depressed them with fear. Not only would they suffer, but do it alone without Jesus. The Master recognized their gloom. Grief has filled your hearts (verse 6).

But Christianity is not a religion for pessimists. Fashionable despair has never been the trademark of Christ's followers. Pain there will be, and death, but the process leads to hope and resurrection. That is why Jesus immediately followed his prediction of their troubles with his teaching about the coming of the Holy Spirit, God of light who would fill their being with radiance bright.

They would not face their challenges alone. The Spirit would come to them and Jesus would be near them through the Spirit. The great theme of light, so prevalent in John, would now apply to the action of the Spirit. Light was another way of talking about the divine glory, the act of God seeking ways to be intimately present to people. They would experience the Spirit as Truth, just as they had already encountered Jesus as Truth. From Jesus they had heard truths and experienced him as truly faithful to them. He witnessed the connection between truth and fidelity.

It is one thing to hear a truth, even accept it, and another matter to understand it. Thomas and Philip had listened to Jesus tell them the truth about the Way and the presence of the Father, but they barely knew what I meant. One day soon, the Spirit would come to them and open their minds to the rich meaning of these truths.

Knowing the meaning of Christ's truths would not be enough. Many bright Christians are skillful masters of the teachings of Jesus. They can recite them and deliver long and learned explanations of what they mean. But their approach is purely intellectual. They have knowledge without love. The truth in their minds has not gripped their hearts, emotions, and wills. It floats freely above their behavior and does not affect their lifestyle.

The mission of the Holy Spirit is twofold, to help us grasp the meaning of the truths of Jesus and show us how to translate those truths into love, fidelity, and Christian behavior. The Spirit is a masterful “uniter,” a unifier.

If we have an interior life that is compartmentalized – head here, heart there, will somewhere else, emotions disconnected – then we require a healing process to put it all together. We need an interior unification movement. That is what the Spirit wants to do for us.

Of course the Spirit can do nothing for us if we are not willing to accept the strong yet gentle unifying movement of love. This Spirit is light, glory, life, love unity for us if we open ourselves to his influence. All those terms are different ways of describing the job the Spirit has been sent to do. They are all connected to that deceptively simple term Jesus used to console his nervous apostles, the term being “truth.” “He will guide you to all truth” (verse 13).

Notice how resolutely supernatural and divine was the solution Jesus presented to his apostles. He did not try to minimize their fears. He accepted the fact that they were scared and confused. He did not provide them with reasonable escape routes from the terror ahead. He refused to have them pretend everything would be all right. He rejected offering them mental tricks to tide them through the rough seas. All the rationalizations the rest of us would think up, he repudiated.

Instead he lifted them to the highest levels of faith. Salvation is an act that originates from God and always is divine in its action. As an agent of this salvation, the Spirit of God would roam the whole earth and linger at the door of every human heart, ready to teach the meaning of Christ’s truths and wrap into a marvelous unity the whole human person. Truth would become Love. Once that transformation took place, then the courage the apostles needed would immediately flow from their souls. Within an hour the apostles would run scared. But after Pentecost, armed with the Spirit, they would show how morally brave a person can be when God is in charge.

The Spirit and the Moral Law

The Spirit will also be the world’s greatest consciousness raiser, a conscience trainer. The world will always try to forget the moral law. The frantic energies of the world will be used to block out the voice of conscience. But like a sonorous lawyer in the real courtroom of the planet, the human conscience, the Spirit will arouse moral awareness despite every secular effort to suppress it. This is why Jesus used the expression from the law courts, “convict!” The Spirit will convict the world in regard to sin and righteousness and condemnation (verse 8).

The word for convict convict here also means convince. Hence the Spirit works in two stages, first convincing, then convicting. Through convincing the Spirit brings our consciences to moral awareness and honesty.

Through convicting, the Spirit judges the truth of the matter, and helps us come to the same conclusion. Because of the aggressive work of the Spirit pushing against every human conscience, the world's three great denials will be exposed.

The Denial of Evil

Terrible things happen everyday, yet the modern myth survives that evil does not exist. Nobody sins. Yes, maybe the evil occurs, but nobody is responsible. Social pressures from without and dark emotional drives from within wither away all moral responsibility – or so the culture claims. But the woman who spent a year at Auschwitz and saw her baby torn from her breast and fed to the gas oven, ask her if evil exists. At the beginning of World War II, Albert Camus wrote, “The reign of the beasts has begun.” He had the honesty to recognize evil when he saw it.

The massive denial of evil, despite all evidence to the contrary, is an insult to the intelligence of the human person, let alone a proud and implicit rejection of God. It tells people they are not responsible for their acts in any ultimate moral sense. Maybe what they did was a crime, a sin against the social order. Or perhaps it was due to madness, in which case it is no sin at all. But a conscious sin against God's moral laws? No way.

Jesus powerfully rejected this denial of sin. Why else was he here? The whole purpose of his incarnation, ministry, death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead was to save us from the sin that was all too evident to him. It is sin that is at the root of every other evil in the world. Genesis spelled that out in painful detail. Once the first parents sinned, the troubles in creation started. Revelation says that all the evils of the world are traceable to conscious and deliberate sin. To deny this is to reject a real assessment of the human condition – and to reject any need for salvation. Such a denial means that Christ's whole mission was useless.

The fact that there are always people who will rise up prophetically to make the world aware of its sinfulness, both social and individual, is evidence that the Spirit is at work. It is the Spirit who overcomes the denial of sin by awakening human conscience to this most deep seated of moral problems. We noted that the word that Jesus used for “convict” also means “convince.” First the Spirit must convince human conscience of the truth of the reality of sin.

Then convict those who indeed have sinned and failed to repent. Who shall say there are not sins that cry to heaven for vengeance? Oppression of the poor, the single parents, widows, and street kids. Those who enslave other with drugs and alcohol. Those who cheat workers of their wages, old people of their pensions. Abusive parents and spouses. Is there not a sin against the Holy Spirit – the denial of sin through presumption, the surrender to sin which is despair?

Denial of the Need for Christ's Salvation

If there is no sin, there is no need of a savior. Why look for a redeemer when I have nothing to be redeemed from? This, despite the awesome record of evil. The first recorded death in the Bible resulted from a murder. Cain killed Abel.

The creation of Genesis has become *de-creation* in the twentieth century as the so-called advanced nations (the ones usually denying the need for a savior) extinguished millions of their own sons and daughters in World War I. In addition, the modern world has attempted four major genocides: the Jews in the holocaust, the Ukrainians in the forced famine, the Armenians by a bloodbath, and the Cambodians by systematic murder. And when the West spawned a "savior" it was the anti-savior, James Jones, who led his people to mass suicide on a tropical settlement in Jonestown.

Jesus had never committed a crime. He never committed a sin. He taught love and inspired hope. He healed people and consoled them in their sorrows. He was likeable and loveable. He stood for all that was decent and humane. Children loved him. He was the most likely candidate to be a savior. But because deep within humanity there is a tendency to deny the need for a savior (just as there is an equal hunger to have a savior), that dark side of the human spirit prevailed.

When such a denial overcomes the fundamental desire for salvation, then the forces of evil gather and destroy the object of their hatred. Denial is an unhealthy attitude. When it takes the form of hostile aggression, it becomes deadly. Denial for the need of a savior released a rush of evil impulses which rapidly joined forces to kill Jesus. A coalition of Jewish and Roman leaders connected and brought about the crucifixion of Jesus. The best person in the world was visibly killed as a criminal. The greatest upholder of justice was executed as one who had performed an injustice.

Denial of the need for Jesus as savior has had equally fatal consequences in contemporary times. Just as the Romans did all they could to liquidate Christians – and therefore Christ – so the modern states have used the awesome power provided by technology's weapons to hunt, kill and oppress Christians in Central and Eastern Europe, China and Vietnam. More subtly, the free cultures of the West practice the same denial by picking away at Christian belief in a thousand ways. Blood martyrdom on the one hand and dry martyrdom on the other.

That is just it! The Spirit has raised up witnesses to faith in the need for salvation above all where the opposition is greatest. Militant atheism-triumphant has proved to be the sham it always was, and now its most ardent advocates are abandoning the idea. The divine "attorney" has breathed the spirit of faith into millions of people, kept alive the consciences of believers in gulags, death camps, jungle prisons, in the homes of the poor, and the citadels of the mighty. If the human conscience is a field, the Spirit is its most favorite farmer.

If conscience is the world's permanent courtroom, the Spirit is its most active lawyer, exposing radical denials and calling people to honesty and truth. Jesus is indeed our Redeemer.

The Denial of Satan

The Holy Spirit as lawyer has one more conviction to make, that of Satan. Jesus foretold that by the Spirit, "the ruler of this world has been condemned" (verse 11).

But before the conviction, there must be the convincing. The Spirit must awaken human conscience to the reality of Satan and overcome the pervasive denial of his present. C.S. Lewis has written the best book on this subject of denial of Satan. His *Screwtape Letters* is a brilliant and humorous, yet deadly serious, explosion of the modern myth that there is no devil. The world tries to convince believes that Satan is a myth. A comic character drawn from the mists of legend, fantasy and pre-industrial superstition. This denial of Satan is in reality the comforting myth of the upscale modern, too sophisticated to believe in such nonsense, too educated to be bothered with silly stories about the devil.

As Lewis points out, that is just the way Satan wants it. The Father of Lies is happiest when his "big lie" works. The theory of the big lie is that the more you tell it, the more people will believe it. Biblical people had no trouble believing Satan, though they never made him an equal of God as some other ancient religions did. The Bible calls him a lion, a wolf, a dragon and a serpent, but above all, a fallen angel. Jesus refers to him as the "Ruler of this World," the "Prince of Darkness." In the epistles he is the chief one among the evil "principalities and powers." The evidence is so extensive that it is a wonder that some believers could be persuaded that Satan is not present today.

The eighteenth century Age of Reason, or Enlightenment, had much to do with creating the modern myth of the denial of Satan. But the horrors of the twentieth century and the dissolution of the optimistic "myth of progress through science and technology" has created the environment in which the Holy Spirit can convince contemporary conscience of the presence of this dangerous source of evil. In Christ's time Satan's purpose was to destroy Jesus. The Lord spoke of this, "The ruler of the world is coming. He has no power over me" (John 14:30). Satan has the same purpose today.

The Spirit is at work in our consciences arousing them to an awareness of the fatal temptations of Satan. The "ruler of the world" wants to rule our souls, dividing us from Christ, from one another and from all those we love. The word devil means divider. Once the Spirit can convince us, he can convict Satan. We must permit the Spirit to make our consciences sensitive to this dangerous presence. Exposed, Satan can be convicted. Denied, he makes us his victims. The first choice is better.

A Lesson From a Woman in Labor (John 16:16-33)

To help them cope with the troubles ahead, Jesus gave them a divine teaching about the Spirit's powerful presence and action. He followed that up with a familiar human image. A woman in labor suffers pain and anxiety, but she suffers in hope.

“When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born in to the world (verse 21). The screams and tears of a woman in labor will be followed by her laughter and clear-eyed joy.

The theme of pain and struggle as the prelude to joy and the source of hope is as common in secular wisdom as it is in Christ's teachings. T-shirts sport the axioms: No pain – No gain. No guts, No glory. The Latin proverb echoes the same truth. “Per aspera ad astra.” (Through the struggles – To the stars). Those are the little sayings of perennial common sense.

Most people wish the process were otherwise. They prefer a painless path to glory and happiness. They declare, defensively and aggressively, that life should be easy. They read dozens of self-help books that assure them the road to salvation is simple and easy. They listen to the Dr. Feelgood's and Dr. Goodvibes – modern versions of snake-oil salesmen – who confidently peddle yet another quick fix for the restless people who refuse to face the pain and discipline needed to mature psychologically and spiritually.

Jesus was clearly not against people feeling happy. “I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice and no one will take your joy away from you” (verse 22). But he delivered the tough message that hope and joy are found in taking the path of suffering that alone leads to the desired happiness. His message would sound stern and cold if he did not balance it with the assurance of hope, peace, joy and fulfillment. His words would leave us desolate if he did not show how it worked in his own life and promise us the Spirit's presence so we did not walk alone. The divine comedy has a tragic phase. Exactly. A phase, not a dead-end. “Those that sow in tears, shall reap rejoicing” (Psalm 126:5).