

There's a delightful scene in Dickens's novel *Bleak House* where an ex-soldier, Mr Bagnet, is treating his wife to a birthday meal prepared entirely by himself and his two daughters. It's the same meal every year: two very scrawny chickens passed off on the gullible Mr Bagnet by an artful butcher and presented always to Mrs. Bagnet as a great surprise. She, in her great love for Mr Bagnet and the children, always accepts it as such and endures the meal even though she is fully aware of the disaster that is unfolding:

Mr Bagnet is himself directing the roasting of the poultry; and Mrs Bagnet with her wholesome brown fingers itching to prevent what she sees going wrong, sits in her gown of ceremony, an honoured guest.

And, as Dickens goes on to describe,

It is well for the old girl that she has but one birthday in a year, for two such indulgences in poultry might be injurious. Every kind of finer tendon and ligament that is in the nature of poultry to possess is developed in these specimens in the singular form of guitar strings.

And so on. Until finally all is done and

Quebec and Malta (her two daughters) appear in fresh attire, smiling and dry; pipes, tobacco and something to drink, are placed upon the table, and the old girl enjoys the first peace of mind she ever knows on the day of this delightful entertainment.

The point being that Jesus has now to leave his disciples in the hope that they can look after themselves in the further propagation of his gospel; the good news, that is, that he has not left us orphans, after all, but will be with us, as Spirit, as we continue, as Church, to blunder our way through history. And this presence of the risen Christ in the Church, however difficult at times it may seem so, is the promise held out for the whole world, too, of Christ's presence and love and final victory, no matter, again, how difficult at times this may seem so. It's that subtle combination, again, of what God does for us and what we have to do for one another. Jesus has to leave his disciples if they are ever to grow in spirit but this is only made possible by love. All analogies limp, of course, but I wonder whether Mrs Bagnet's endurance of this sign of love on her husband's part doesn't say something about God's endurance of us.

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