

Fourth Sunday of Easter May 7, 2006

INTRODUCTION: In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told about Peter and John healing a crippled beggar in the Temple. Once the man was healed, he was so excited that he could walk he started jumping and running around. You can imagine this caused quite a stir in the Temple. People wanted to know how he was cured and the apostles started telling them about Jesus. Very quickly the apostles were arrested for preaching about Jesus. The leaders wanted everyone to forget about Jesus and so they dragged the apostles into court. Today's first reading is Peter's statement before the Jewish leaders. [Acts 4, 8-12]

HOMILY: "There is no salvation in anyone else, for there is no other name in the whole world given to people by which we are to be saved." These words conclude today's first reading. It was part of St. Peter's speech to the Jewish leaders who had put him on trial for healing a crippled man in the name of Jesus.

"There is no salvation in anyone else..." Several years ago I had a discussion with a lady in another parish. She had a daughter in our parish school, a little girl for whom our parish was paying most of the tuition. I never saw the mother or daughter in church on Sunday so I decided to have a little talk with her about it. She said her daughter was significantly involved in gymnastics and then she told me, "Gymnastics is her salvation!" I was too stunned to know what to say to this person who claimed to be a good Catholic. She missed something along the way of her spiritual journey. St. Peter would not have had any difficulty responding to that statement. He would have said "there is no salvation in anyone else..." other than Jesus.

Now I'm not going to bash sports or athletics. I'm not much of a spectator, but I used to play lots of sports before I hurt my knee: softball, handball, racquetball, tennis, ice skating, roller skating, swimming, bowling (when I was in the seminary I had charge of taking care of the bowling alleys). I even tried to play polo. I stayed on the horse pretty well, but I was lousy trying to hit that polo ball. Participation in sports has a lot of benefits, and for a select few they can mean big bucks. But they are no one's salvation in the fullest sense of the word.

Almost everyone remembers the first commandment: "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me." I doubt that anyone has a golden statue of Jupiter or Mars sitting around their house to which they burn incense. But there are other kinds of idols. Idols can take the form of sports or the TV, or money, or pride, or lust, or laziness, or addictions or any form at all. Even doing God's work can pull us away from God. There are times when I let myself become so busy that my necessary prayers get neglected. Anything can become an idol when it becomes more important than God himself, when it pushes God into a secondary or inferior place in our lives. There are many areas of our lives that are important, but God has to be there too. As we get closer to God, God may invite us to become more and more generous with ourselves in our love for him and for others, but there are some basic bottom line rules which he expects us to follow and which are not at all unreasonable or excessively demanding.

Today Jesus tells us he is the good shepherd. [Jn. 10, 11-18] He is a shepherd who is

dedicated to his sheep. He cares about his sheep and not about getting a paycheck. He tells us he knows each of us individually and is willing to risk his life for us. He did lay down his life for us. Shepherds are not so common today, so the image does not grab us like it would have touched Jesus' listeners 2000 years ago. But there is another image Jesus used a lot, an image that is similar to the shepherd image and an image we can all relate to - the image of a loving parent.

As a Father and a shepherd he guides us. One of the ways he guides us is through his word that teaches us and the sacrament of the Eucharist that nourishes us. His love is greater than we can imagine and in his love he wants us to follow his lead for "there is no salvation in anyone else..."

Fifth Sunday of Easter **May 14, 2006**

INTRODUCTION [*Acts 9, 26-31; I John 3, 18-24; John 15, 1-8*] Many of the Jews, because they were under Roman occupation, had two names - a Jewish name and a Roman name. Thus St. Paul also had the name Saul. Most of the time he is called Paul, but occasionally, as in today's first reading, he is called Saul. You remember he was a zealous Pharisee and a fierce persecutor of all who believed in Christ. As a matter of fact, it was when he was traveling to Damascus to arrest Christians there, that Jesus appeared to him and convinced him he was all wrong. His life turned around completely and he started preaching and teaching about Jesus. Even after three years in Damascus, preaching that Jesus was the Son of God, the Christian community in Jerusalem was not convinced that he was for real. When he first showed up in Jerusalem, as we hear in today's first reading, they still didn't trust him.

HOMILY A mother and father who had been married to one another for 45 years were living in California. They had a son who lived in New York and a daughter who lived in Chicago. It was the day before Mothers' Day and the father called his son and told him: "I have bad news for you. After 45 years of misery, your mother and I are calling it quits. We're getting a divorce." The son went ballistic. He tried to tell his father they couldn't do that. He called his sister and they both decided to fly to California right away to talk to their parents and straighten them out. They called their folks and told them they would be there the next day. The father hung up the phone, turned to his wife and said "the kids will be home for Mothers' Day and they are paying their own way!"

Happy Mothers' Day to all our mothers. I hope you get a visit from your children or at least a phone call. There was an short article in *US News and World Report* recently that said if stay-at-home moms were to be compensated according to what they are worth, they would command a salary of over \$134,000 a year. As for working moms, they deserve to be paid nearly \$86,000 a year just for their household duties, including those of chef, accountant, teacher, chauffeur, and nurse. Of course a mother's true worth can't be measured in dollars and cents; they are priceless.

Today on Mothers' Day we recall one of the people who gave us life. Some times when people get older they want to know even more about their origins. At least once or twice a week we get

phone calls asking us if we have records about someone's grandparents, great grand parents or even further back. I only wish I had asked and had written down more about my own ancestors before my parents had died.

Jesus is telling us today about our spiritual ancestry in the image of the vine and the branches. In a typical family tree, one generation brings new life into the world and then they pass on. Those who gave us life leave us to survive on our own and on what they taught us.

Jesus' example shows us that even though he is the source of our spiritual life, we are always dependent on him just as a branch depends on the vine. Christ never leaves us to survive on our own. If we were to become separated from him spiritually we would be dead. Without me you can do nothing he tells us.

Did you ever notice how many ways Jesus tried to tell us we need to stay close to him? Last Sunday we heard him tell us "I am the good shepherd." Sheep need their shepherd to survive. He told us "I am the bread of life." We need food to live. He told us "I am the light of the world." Picture trying to get around without light. If suddenly a dense cloud would cover the earth, not only would it be difficult to move around but life as we now know it would eventually disappear.

Independence is highly valued in our land. We have a special day set aside to celebrate it! Yet we're not really independent. We may have gone beyond depending on our parents, but we don't grow our own food, pump our own water, manufacture our own cars and refine our own oil and produce our own electricity. We probably didn't build the house we live in or pave the street we drive on. We have armies and police to protect us from hostile people. We enjoy the freedoms we enjoy only because we have learned to work together, share our resources and talents and depend on one another in countless ways.

Jesus is telling us the more we learn to depend on him, the more we remain united with him and draw life from him, then the more freedom we have from those forces that seek to enslave us: sin, addiction and hopelessness. Even death cannot ultimately conquer us for Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He will prune us sometimes, but only that we might bear fruit; fruit being the result of a virtuous life within us; results that will endure for eternity.

Sixth Sunday of Easter May 21, 2006

INTRODUCTION: The issue in today's first reading (*Acts 10, 25-26,34-35,44-48*) is how the Apostles should deal with Gentiles who heard about Jesus and started to believe in him. Should they have equal status with the Jews who were the original followers of Christ? Should they be required to follow all the Jewish laws, circumcision, strict dietary laws, and special feast days?

God gave St. Peter the answer to this question in a most unusual way. While Peter was in prayer, God gave Peter a vision of many different birds and animals. Many of them were birds and animals the Jews were not allowed to eat, such as pork. God told Peter to eat them. Peter

said he would never eat anything forbidden. God said to him: “What God has made clean, you are not to call unclean.” God had to say this three times to Peter, showing how difficult it was for Peter to grasp this idea. When the vision disappeared, God told Peter there were some men coming to see him and he was to go with them to the home of a Gentile named Cornelius, a Roman centurion. A strict Jew was not allowed to enter a Gentile’s house, but God told him to, so he did. When Peter got there he spoke to Cornelius and his relatives and friends about Jesus. As Peter finished speaking, Cornelius and all who were with him were filled with the Holy Spirit. This event is the background for today’s first reading. Peter’s entire speech is not included in the reading. The liturgy wants to get right to the point: that God’s love in Jesus is meant for all people. Peter had finally understood what God had told him in his vision and without requiring these pagans to be circumcised or requiring them to accept Jewish traditions and customs, he ordered them all to be baptized.

HOMILY: Today’s gospel (*Jn 15, 9-17*) has a great deal of meaning for me. When I was first ordained, I was teaching six hours a day at a high school and was assistant at one of the largest parishes in the city. Without trying to sound like a hero, I have to tell you I was a young priest, full of enthusiasm for my calling and I was busy all week except for a few hours I took off after school and parish duties on Friday evening. One day while I was praying, I heard in my heart our Lord speaking to me the words we just heard in the gospel: “I no longer call you slaves,...I have called you friends.” I immediately knew he was telling me he wanted me to spend more than a couple of minutes in quiet prayer with him every day. In asking this he was asking for a little more friendship, a little more love. It wasn’t a big deal he was asking of me, just that I work about 15 minutes less so I could spend 15 minutes more in prayer. I couldn’t refuse his request when he put it that way: “I no longer call you slaves... I have called you friends.” And so, I started spending a little more time in quiet prayer. And because I did that, and continue to do so, I have received so many blessings.

We know of course that real love shows itself more by what we *do*, than by what we say. But I’m sure we’ve seen situations where spouses or parents *did* lots of things for the family, but never had time to share themselves. I’ve known many a marriage that broke up just for that reason. They did things for each other but they never had time just to *be* with each other and share themselves with each other.

God could easily have created robots to do the things he wanted done. But he created people with hearts capable of love and he waits for us to love him. St. John tells us in today’s second reading: “in this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his son as an expiation for our sins.” (*I Jn. 4, 7-10*) And in his love he waits for our response. We are reminded of that love each time we come to Mass, each time we recall his death for us, each time he gives himself to us in the Eucharist.

Each time we come to the Eucharist we must remember that we are not only united with God in love, but we are united with one another. And so our Lord tells us twice in today’s gospel to love one another. He tells us this is a commandment. It’s interesting Jesus calls it a “commandment!” Many people today have a distorted notion of love. Too often we’ve seen people on TV or in the movies passionately saying to each other: “I love you.” We tend to think love means romance and passion. It’s something that flows out of us naturally and effortlessly.

Now, I'm not against that kind of love. It's wonderful – it's even a preview of the love and joy we will experience in heaven. But if the divorce rate tells us anything, real love has to be more than passion. Love is not always dreamy and wonderful. Sometimes it's hard, sometimes it's less than exciting. Sometimes we have to be a loving person even when we don't *feel* like it and so Jesus said it is a commandment. Love means staying up with a sick child at times, forgiving a spouse who may have been insensitive, not getting our way all the time, taking time to communicate, being grateful for small favors. I got up this morning. I didn't feel like doing that. I would rather have stayed in bed. But I did it because of love, because I love God, I love you, the people I serve. Love isn't always warm fuzzy feelings, anyone who is married more than a couple of years knows it is a sense of commitment and dedication. The warm fuzzy feelings come and go. As today's gospel puts it, loving one another is a command, but Jesus gives us this command "so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete." You want more joy, ask the Lord to help you to lead you to greater love.

Our Lord, who is love itself as St. John tells us in today's second reading, has tried to teach us what is important for a love that will last. And what he has taught us is we must remain in him, for he will lead us to a love that cannot fail and a joy that is eternal.

Feast of the Ascension **May 28, 2006**

Today we celebrate the feast of the Ascension. It is interesting to compare the way it is described in different parts of the Scriptures according to the particular purpose of each of the writers. **St. Matthew**, for example, doesn't describe the ascension at all. He **implies** there was a time when Jesus parted from them, and this parting seems to have taken place in Galilee. Matthew doesn't want to stress the parting so much as the idea that even though we can no longer see our Lord he is still with us. Jesus' last words in Matthew's gospel are: "Behold, I am with you always..." **St. Luke**, on the other hand, has Jesus leaving from Bethany, outside Jerusalem. There's even a rock there with a faint footprint on it which the tour guide will tell you is the very rock Jesus was standing on when he ascended. Luke gave us both the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. In the **Acts of the Apostles** he tells us Jesus ascended 40 days after Easter. In his **gospel** we get the impression this happened on Easter Sunday. Today's gospel was from **St. Mark's** 16th chapter. If we read the entire 16th chapter of St. Mark, we also get the impression this event happened on Easter Sunday. St. Mark wants us to know that Jesus continues to work in and through the Church and the apostles. **St. John's gospel** is especially interesting as John not only gives us the impression the ascension took place on Easter Sunday, but that Jesus also gave the apostles the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday night. I'm sure you remember the gospel for the second Sunday of Easter which was from John, how John tells us Jesus appeared to his apostles on Easter Sunday evening, wished them peace, showed them his hands and his side, told them he was sending them as he had been sent, then immediately he breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit." All of this leaves us confused. When did Jesus ascend? And from where?

The gospels are very exact as to when the resurrection occurred, on the first day of the week, early in the morning; and where it happened: in a borrowed tomb where Jesus was buried outside

of Jerusalem. Archeologists are nearly certain that the tomb around which the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built is the exact tomb where Jesus was buried.

With the Ascension, it's obviously not the day or the place that is so important but the **meaning** of the event. I want to mention three meanings. 1) Jesus' risen body entered into the world of the divine. He is no longer present among us in a way that our senses can perceive him. For brief moments he did make himself visible to some of his followers but that period of time ended shortly after the resurrection and perhaps that's where the idea of the 40 days after the resurrection came from. When I say he entered into the world of the divine, I do not mean he wasn't already divine, the Son of God, the second person of the Blessed Trinity. It's that his human body, which had all the limitations that our own bodies have in terms of getting hungry, tired, feeling pain, that human body of Jesus was glorified and is now taken over with the fullness of his divine nature. The recent DeVinci Code says boldly that Jesus was revered simply as a wise human teacher and was not acclaimed as divine until the time of Constantine, who lived over three hundred years after Christ. Dan Brown's so called **history and theology** is as fictitious as his characters. The gospels and letters of the Apostles that we hear each Sunday were written two hundred to two hundred and fifty years before Constantine. And they were accepted as a true and authentic representation of Jesus Christ. That's why they became the gospels the Christian community used and honored as opposed to other so called "gospels" that were written later. If they had not given us an honest picture of Jesus Christ, they would have been long forgotten rather than copied and read again and again. Getting back to the ascension, it brings to completion and perfection the resurrection. Jesus not only came back to life, but he returned to the Father who had sent him and to quote Paul in today's second reading, Jesus was seated at God's right hand, "far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion..." And yet, although he is glorified at the right hand of the Father, he continues to be **with us**, but in a new way. We **now** come to know him not by physical sight but by meeting him through prayer, the sacraments, the Scriptures and through each other.

The second meaning of the ascension is that Jesus' ascension is a preview of God's plans for each of us who are faithful to him. We hope to rise to glory with him and to enter into a new life with him some day. When we say in the creed "we look for the resurrection of the dead" that does not mean we will come back to life and then spend eternity wandering aimlessly throughout the universe. Our resurrection will allow our bodies to share in new life in union with Jesus in God's kingdom.

There is a third meaning for the ascension: it's up to us to keep his work going ("Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature...") Today there are about a billion believers in Jesus. That was only because a handful of his followers shared their faith with others. It's up to us now. If we keep our faith a secret from everyone else, we will not be doing anyone a favor. We need to share it, we need to ask people to come with us to Church and share in what we do. And it has to come more from you than from me. If I say something about God or faith or going to Church, people will think "well, he's supposed to say that. That's what he's getting paid for." If you say it it will carry much more weight. "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature..." is meant for all those who believe in Jesus.

Summing things up: Christ is with us now as we gather in his name. He promised he would be,

and he gives himself to us in the Eucharist. He gives us a preview of our own future glory in his ascension and he has left us with the job of continuing his work, bringing the message of faith and the love of God to others. Amen.