

Passion Sunday

April 1, 2007

Every year on Good Friday we hear the gospel account of Jesus' passion according to John. And every year on Palm Sunday we hear the gospel account of the passion according to one of the other three evangelists. This year we hear from Luke.

I would like to point out three details of Luke's gospel that are unique to him. First of all Luke stresses Jesus' innocence. The Roman governor was the only person in Judea at the time of Jesus who could legally condemn anyone to death. That governor, Pontius Pilate, a man who was noted for his cruelty and who was eventually removed from office by Rome because of his cruelty, declared Jesus innocent in all four gospels. But unlike the other gospels, St. Luke tells us Pilate declared Jesus' innocence, not once or twice, but three separate times. Also, it's only Luke who tells us about the incident with Herod. Most likely to get himself off the hook and avoid condemning an innocent man, Pilate sent Jesus to Herod when he heard Jesus was from the district of Galilee. Herod just happened to be in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. Although Herod was hoping Jesus would work some miracle, he ended up treating Jesus with contempt when Jesus didn't respond to him. Luke tells us Herod, too, found no charge against him and he sent him back to Pilate. It's only Luke who tells us about the criminal who was crucified with Jesus who declared: "we have been condemned justly... but this man has done nothing wrong." Mark tells us of the centurion who exclaimed when Jesus died: "Truly this man was the Son of God." Luke has the centurion declare, "This man was innocent beyond doubt." The innocent Jesus suffered mockery, violent abuse, injustice, and rejection by his own people. If we were there, would we have been among those who honored him with palms and Hosannas. Or would we have been among those calling for his execution. Or would we simply have been, as many are in our world today, indifferent to it all.

The second characteristic of Jesus that St. Luke emphasizes is his forgiving nature. We see it in all the gospels, but Luke's gospel is especially the gospel of divine mercy. Even as Jesus was on his way to a most cruel and unfair death, he continued to heal and to forgive. All three gospels tell us that at the time of Jesus' arrest, one of his disciples cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Only St. Luke tells us that Jesus healed the ear. Only St. Luke tells us about the hostility between Pilate and Herod and how, somehow, as a result of Pilate sending Jesus to Herod, they overcame their hatred for each other that day. St. Luke tells us how Jesus forgave those who put him to death: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." He even gave forgiveness and promised paradise to the criminal who, with faith, asked Jesus to remember him when he entered his kingdom. Although we are unable to claim to be innocent as Jesus was, we can still follow his example of offering healing and forgiveness rather than hatred and vengeance.

One last detail we probably missed is that Luke does not tell us about the crowning with thorns. He tells us Jesus was mocked and ridiculed, but chooses not to go into the details. Perhaps he felt he had too much more he had to say.

All through my life, meditating on the sufferings of Jesus has given me strength during difficult times. We all have problems in life of one sort or another. Christ's sufferings can give you strength and hope too.

Good Friday

April 6, 2007

Jesus was a good man who came to preach, to heal, to teach us how to love God and to love others. He chose to remain faithful to his mission no matter what it cost him. And indeed it cost him. Crucifixion was one of the most horrible forms of torture ever devised by human beings throughout recorded history.

Other than reminding us of our own potential for cruelty or reminding us of Christ's faithfulness to his mission, we have to look at Jesus' death from the perspective of whom it was who suffered.

He wasn't just some great person out of history. He wasn't just some holy man, or a good teacher, or a powerful healer, or an altruistic fellow. He was the Son of God. He was God who took on our human flesh, who got tired and hungry and thirsty, who walked the dusty roads everyone else walked, but whose love was greater than any one of us can begin to imagine. He was God who, in love, kept doing good for the people he loved – even in the face of betrayal, denial, abandonment, beating, ridicule, false accusations, and crucifixion.

Lots of people in the course of history have given their lives for others. Lots of soldiers have made the supreme sacrifice in defending their loved ones in battle. But Jesus' death was different than that. His death opens up a new world for us, a new vision of God. His death gives a new meaning to human suffering and death, showing us that God can take our crosses and defeats and turn them into the possibility of new life for us.

Of course, all the gospels stress Jesus' divinity, but John's gospel pictures it so much more clearly. Jesus is in control of the whole event. Jesus knew Judas was turning him in; he knew the Jewish leaders would come to get him. He didn't try to run away. John doesn't deny the terrible agony in the garden; he just doesn't mention it. When Jesus identifies himself, the forces of Satan fall back in the presence of the great I AM. (The Greek says "I am.") He tells the soldiers, if I am the one you want, let these men go. He discourages Peter's efforts to beat off his enemies with a sword. Jesus is in charge of the situation.

Before Pilate, Jesus answers the governor with dignity and honesty. Soon we see Pilate squirming in an effort to get out of making the decision of condemning a man he knew was innocent. He tried to stir up the sympathy of the people by humiliating Jesus and having him

scourged, but he finally caved in to the crowd. The crime Jesus was charged with announced to the world in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin – that Jesus was king of the Jews.

Jesus carried his own cross. John doesn't tell us about Simon of Cyrene who was called into service to help him carry it. On the cross, Jesus doesn't cry out "My God, my God ..." Instead he makes provisions for his mother. He is even in charge of the moment of death when he announced "It is finished."

We're not going to figure out this mystery of divine love today, or even this year, or in a lifetime. (Inserted the story of the Zen master.) Some saints may have gained a depth of understanding which sent them into ecstasy, but most of us just keep trying – but that's all right.

That's why we commemorate Jesus' death and resurrection every day and every week. That's why Jesus said "do this in memory of me," because both Our Lord and the Church knows we have to keep remembering it, thinking about it, understanding it differently as we grow and mature and encounter new life challenges.

Jesus' death is one of the central mysteries of our faith, the key act of God that offers us eternal life. But it is not his death alone that saves us; it is his resurrection too. (Christ died for our sins . . .) So again we recall what Jesus did for us, trying to understand the whole mystery a little better. We are solemn and somber, yet we know we are celebrating too, (it is after all "Good Friday). We celebrate the event by which we are saved, and celebrate an infinite love which we do not yet understand but in which the cross helps us to believe.

Easter

April 8, 2007

A week before Easter, a Sunday school teacher was teaching her class of little children about Jesus' seven last words on the cross. Finally she asked "What was the last thing Jesus said before he died?" A little boy raised his hand and answered: "He said: 'I'll be back.'"

A father was trying to get his two sons to eat a healthy lunch after they had stuffed themselves with Easter candy. After several failed attempts his wife said to him "It's Easter Sunday. What do you expect, a miracle?"

What would it be like if there were no spring, if winter just stayed on and on (as it seems to be doing)? It would embarrass all the global warming people but worse than that. All life would eventually die. Our world would become a frozen lifeless body floating in space. Our spiritual life without Easter would be like our world without spring, for the death and resurrection of Jesus is the source of our life in God. There is no day of the entire year that can compare with Easter. Not even Christmas would be celebrated if there were no Easter for without Easter it is unlikely

we would ever have even heard of Jesus. If he had not risen, his small group of followers would have drifted apart. It was only the resurrection, along with the sending of the Spirit, that gave his followers the courage and the purpose to go on talking about him.

It always seems at this time of the year the media comes out with some kind of book or movie or TV program that tries to make people question the reality of the death or the resurrection of Jesus. They have to find something controversial no matter how obscure it may be. We cannot prove the resurrection scientifically. It is a matter of faith. As a doctrine of faith, it is not something that someone just dreamed up one day. There is a solid foundation for the faith that we have in the resurrection of Jesus. What is that foundation? We have an empty tomb, a tomb that has been venerated by believers from the earliest days of the Church. It still is, even after it had been buried for 200 years under a temple built to honor the Greek goddess, Aphrodite. Most likely the shroud of Turin, the cloth in which Jesus' body was laid to rest, provides a basis for the resurrection of Jesus. The strongest evidence, in my mind, is the witness of Jesus' apostles to the resurrection. They were not a gullible bunch who were expecting the resurrection or were looking for it to happen. We have the story of the doubting Thomas, which we will hear next week, that illustrates it. It was the appearances of Jesus to the Apostles that convinced them Jesus truly had risen. The resurrection of Jesus wasn't something they believed in as we have to believe in it – it was something they had seen for themselves. They witnessed to it. In Greek the word for witness is *martyria* (μαρτυρία). This indicates what happened to the apostles for standing by their story that Jesus had risen and had appeared to them many times. They had nothing to gain in a worldly way by witnessing to Jesus' resurrection. They only brought suffering and eventual martyrdom upon themselves by doing so. Like their master, they were faithful to what they proclaimed no matter what.

Our faith is founded on that witness, a witness that goes back to the beginning. In our faith we find hope, hope that there is a way out of any darkness, hope that God can take any disaster, any tragedy and make something good come out of it. If we have sinned, if we have suffered something terrible, it is not beyond redemption. God can transform it. The empty tomb gives us hope, hope that death is not the end of our existence, hope that death is not the end of life for those we love. Easter is the answer to all the tears that we shed at the graves of our loved ones because it tells us God has better things planned for us.

If we truly believe in Easter, then we have to live a new life. Paul tells us we are to be intent on things above rather than on things of earth. If Christ's resurrection does not begin to transform us now, when will it begin to do so? We can't wait for death to catch up with us. Sharing Christ's risen life must begin now through the grace he gives us in the sacraments.

Today God reveals not only the resurrection of his Son. God also shows us his plans for all who are his sons and daughters. May the hope of the new life of Christ fill your hearts today with Alleluia.

Second Sunday of Easter

April 15, 2007

INTRODUCTION

The four gospels tell us about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Essentially, the rest of the new testament tells us about Jesus after his resurrection and ascension, how he continued his work through his followers and through the Church.

In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles we see the power of Jesus at work through the signs and wonders that the apostles worked. Our second reading is from the book of Revelation. Most probably this book was written sometime between 81 and 96 AD, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian. It was a time of persecution for the Church. John tells us in today's passage he was in exile on a little island called Patmos as punishment for preaching about Jesus. The Lord appeared to him there and revealed to him that Jesus would not abandon those who were faithful to him. Those suffering for their faith in Jesus would be victorious in the end.

HOMILY

Woody Allen is quoted as saying: "if only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank." Our gospel today invites us to reflect on the meaning of faith. If God gave us all clear signs, we wouldn't need faith. Faith essentially means trusting someone when we have no clear signs. Faith is not the same as putting our trust in anyone and everyone. That's just being naive and gullible. At the same time, if we are afraid to trust anyone we will live in our own little world of fear and paranoia. It's a difficult balance to keep knowing who we can and who we cannot trust.

One person we can trust is Jesus. In our second reading, Jesus appeared to John and told him "Do not be afraid." Fear is the opposite of trust. When he tells us do not be afraid, he is telling us to trust him. He is the master over life and death, for as he said, "I hold the keys to death."

Another way of saying all this is Jesus' greeting to his apostles on Easter Sunday night: "Peace be with you." A person full of fear and anxiety and worry does not know peace. Before we know peace we have to know who we can trust and know that our trust is secure.

Our trust is secure in Jesus but we all wish the Lord would give us a little more proof, as he did to Thomas. Three times John's gospel tells us Thomas was called the twin. Why do you think John made such a point of the fact that he was a twin? Perhaps in a symbolic way we are his twin, wanting proof like he did. Thomas wouldn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus, even with the other ten apostles and some of the women telling him it happened. But I still have to give Thomas credit. He could have walked away and said "you're all crazy. I'm getting out of here." He stayed with them through what must have been a very difficult week for him. I think there's a lesson here. When we have doubts and questions about our faith, we need to stay with it and not walk away. If Thomas had walked away, he would never have seen the Lord. The gospel is telling us, if we stay with it, the Lord will reveal himself to us. We will see him and know him,

maybe not with our eyes, but with our mind and heart.

A lot of times we hear people say: "seeing is believing." What they are really saying is they don't believe one word we're saying, because believing is accepting something without seeing it. Seeing is not believing, but with God the opposite is true according to the gospel. Believing will lead to seeing. But we have to believe first. We have to trust in what we hear (the words of Jesus) rather than in what we see (for the Lord tells us about things that are unseen). And we trust in what we hear because we choose to trust Jesus.

One of the greatest challenges to our faith today is the Eucharist. Jesus told us: "This is my body... this is my blood." Because we can't put the Eucharist under a microscope or examine it in some other way and see Jesus there, many people say "This is just a symbol. This is just a reminder of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. It's not really his body and blood." The gospels and the earliest tradition of the Church tell us the Eucharist is exactly what Jesus said it is. I think the decline in Mass attendance can be explained in large part by the fact that people have lost faith in the Eucharist. Jesus' words to Thomas apply to us as we gather together today in faith: "Blessed (a word with also means 'fortunate' or 'happy') are those who have not seen and have believed."

Third Sunday of Easter

April 22, 2007

INTRODUCTION: The glory of the risen Lord is reflected in today's readings. Before commenting on our first reading, it is worth pointing out the symbolism in the second reading from the book of Revelation. The setting for the scene is in heaven. The focus is on Christ, symbolized as a sacrificial lamb who reigns gloriously with God the Father. It is worth commenting on this symbol because it is the symbol on the front of our altar. The lamb is standing on a book in which was written the revelation of what was to come. Only Jesus was worthy to break open the seven seals that kept the book from being opened. In today's reading the liturgy of praise being offered to Jesus recognizes his divinity and his equality with the Father.

And now about today's first reading. Immediately prior to today's reading the apostles Peter and John, in the name of Jesus, healed a crippled man in the Temple. This gave Peter the opportunity to preach about the risen Lord and it led to the arrest of Peter and John. They were warned not to preach about Jesus again and were released. They continued to preach and, that time after their arrest, were thrown into jail. In the middle of the night an angel released them from jail and they went right back to preaching about Jesus. It wasn't long before they were arrested for the third time and this is where our first reading comes in. Today's passage leaves out a few verses which I think are very important. Those verses tell us that as a punishment for disobeying the various warning of the court not to preach about Jesus, the apostles were

scourged, then they were set free. What is remarkable is they were joyful about it; they felt honored to have suffered for the name of the Lord.

HOMILY: John tells us the apostles had been fishing all night and they caught nothing. As the sun was coming up Jesus appeared to them. He not only gave them all the fish they could handle but was busy getting breakfast ready for them. On the surface John is simply describing the scene for us in this lovely story of one of Jesus' appearances after the resurrection. But, as often happens in John's gospel, there is a deeper meaning in what he is telling us. In this passage about night and dawn, darkness and light, John is doing more than simply telling us the time of day. Let me explain what I mean.

John's gospel begins with the words "In the beginning..." What's so important about these words? These are the very words that begin the whole bible, the first words from the book of Genesis. What does that have to do with light and darkness? When God began to create the world, the first thing he created was light. So after John begins his gospel by telling us "in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God," he goes on to tell us: "He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. Life itself was in him and this life was light for all people." John's theme continues that not everyone accepted the light, but the light was unable to be put out.

The image of light and darkness continues to weave its way through John. In chapter three we hear about a Pharisee named Nicodemus who was curious to learn more from Jesus, and he came to Jesus at night. It was a practical thing to do considering the hostility against Jesus, but a symbolic detail for John as well. Nicodemus was seeking the light and until he was enlightened by Jesus, he was in the dark.

Again, in the ninth chapter of John we hear about Jesus healing a man born blind. The whole chapter contrasts the blindness of the Pharisees, people who had sight but whose minds and hearts were closed to the light, with the insights of the blind man, the one who lived in darkness all his life until he met Jesus. In this chapter Jesus says clearly, "I am the light of the world."

When we get to the Last Supper in John's gospel, we find a little sentence that might not seem important all by itself but, knowing John's symbolism, it has a depth of meaning. Judas was about to betray Jesus. As he left the supper room John tells us "it was night." For Judas it was night as he walked off into the darkness!

So when we hear today's gospel, we are told the apostles were fishing all night. What did they accomplish? Without Jesus they accomplished nothing. With the dawn the Lord showed up, the one who is the Light of the world, and everything changes. Are there times when we feel like we're working hard and going nowhere? Perhaps reflecting on St. John's themes of light and darkness in today's gospel will remind us of Jesus' words from the Last Supper: "without me you can do nothing?"

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 29, 2007

INTRODUCTION

The first reading describes the Church in the early days of the apostles. We hear about two of them: Saints Paul and Barnabas. It was during Paul's first missionary journey. He and Barnabas were in the area we today know as Turkey. There were communities of Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Some of those communities even had synagogues if they were large or prosperous enough. Paul visited one of those synagogues and, since he was a Pharisee, he was invited to preach to the people. His message was so powerful he was asked to return and preach on the following Sabbath. This is where our first reading comes in. He packed the house, but many of the Jews responded negatively to his message. This didn't discourage the apostles. They went on to preach to the pagan Gentiles. Notice the apostles were filled with joy in spite of rejection. They knew they were doing Christ's work and that the Spirit was leading them.

Today's second reading is a vision of the Church in heaven from the book of Revelation. This vision of heaven was meant to be an encouragement to early Christians to keep following our Lord in spite of a bitter persecution against them. Here Christ is pictured as a Lamb. The image of the lamb symbolized Jesus' sacrifice for us since lambs were so frequently offered in sacrifice in the Old Testament. We use this image still when we refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God. At the end of the reading a second image of Christ is introduced: the lamb of God as our shepherd. But, as he tells us in the gospel, that is true only to the extent that we hear his voice.

HOMILY

If we lived in Israel at the time of Jesus, we would instantly relate to what Jesus told us today in the gospel. Sheep were the people's main source of meat, milk and cheese. They provided wool for clothing. And they were regularly used as sacrifice in their liturgy.

If I were to try to think of something in our culture today that would be similar to the relationship of a shepherd to his sheep, the best comparison I can come up with is a mother who needs to be home to care for several toddlers. Just as toddlers depend on their mother's care, and their mother is always busy, sheep depend on the care of their shepherd and the shepherd, who has dozens of sheep, is kept busy 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Today's gospel makes reference to an activity that shepherds had to go through daily. When night came, a number of shepherds would come together with their sheep and put them in a pen. Then they would sleep while one shepherd would stay awake watching out for thieves or predatory animals. In the morning, each shepherd would call out for his own sheep to follow him to pasture. The sheep knew the voice of their own shepherd and would follow only their own shepherd's voice when they were called. They would ignore all the other shepherds who were

calling for their sheep. The gospel reflects this when Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me."

Some people are offended to hear themselves compared to sheep. Perhaps that's because they don't realize they need God's constant care at all times and not just when they have problems.

We live in a society where everyone is trying to get our attention. You can't turn on the radio or TV without someone trying to sell you something. Even to go for a drive, you have billboards trying to catch your eye. Companies spend significant amounts of money to buy just 30 seconds of advertising time in order to get their message across. Sometimes, like sheep, we just follow the latest message we hear or sometimes we hear so many messages and, like sheep, we just follow the crowd. Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice." If we want to belong to him, we do have to hear his voice. Though in today's world it takes a conscious effort to do so. We have to take time to shut out all kinds of other noises so we can listen to him. If we don't make the effort, we can easily lose touch with our shepherd. This is one reason (among many) to take time to pray and to come to church every Sunday. We need to keep in touch.

Our Lord does not want to lose any one of us. His desire is for us to be with him forever, in heaven, where there will be no more sadness or pain, where as our second reading tells us, he will wipe every tear from our eyes. One of the ways he leads us is through the Eucharist we are celebrating. He is with us as we gather in his name, he speaks to us in Scriptures, he feeds us with his own body and blood. Sheep may not be smart, but they are smart enough to know they need their shepherd and to recognize his voice. Let us pray we are always smart enough to know we need our Shepherd and to listen for his voice.