

Sixth Sunday of Easter - C Cycle
May 5, 2013

INTRODUCTION – (*Acts 15, 1-2.22-29; Revelation 21, 10-14.22-23; John 14, 23-29*)
After the resurrection and Jesus had ascended into heaven, the Apostles and the little following who believed in Jesus were Jews. They did not see themselves as part of a new religion; thus they continued to follow their Jewish laws, customs, rituals and traditions. However, there were problems when Gentiles started to believe in Jesus. Many Jews who accepted Jesus as their savior and messiah insisted that Gentiles had to adopt Jewish ways if they wanted to consider themselves followers of Jesus. So when our first reading speaks of circumcision, it's really talking about all the rules and customs the Jews were bound to follow - dietary laws, feast days, etc. This conflict arose especially in Antioch, in Syria, because it was a large city and racially quite diverse. To solve the problem, the leaders of the Church at Antioch, including St. Paul, went to Jerusalem to meet with some of the other Apostles. Paul insisted that we are saved by Jesus' death and resurrection and the Jewish traditions and laws, other than moral and ethical laws like the Ten Commandments, were no longer required for salvation. With support from St. Peter, Paul's views were accepted by the group. Their decision was sent back to Antioch. It was a major decision, a decision that would affect how the Church would grow. Perhaps Gentiles would never have accepted Christ as their savior if they also had to be circumcised and follow Jewish laws and traditions. Bacon and ham and pork chops would be forbidden as well as shrimp and clams and crabs. If the Apostles had decided that those who followed Christ had to live by Jewish customs and laws, that would have led to only a few Christians in the world today – probably mostly Jewish – rather than the two billion who now worship Jesus. We Gentiles might still be worshipping Zeus, Pluto, Apollo, Dionysus and Aphrodite. Notice how the Apostles introduced their decision: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too..." That the Church is being guided by the Holy Spirit, has always been the belief of the Church whenever the bishops gather in council together with the Holy Father.

HOMILY – All throughout its history, the Church has had challenges to face. When we read about some of the challenges, like we heard about in our first reading, we wonder how the Church survived – but it did, because Christ is with his Church and it is guided by the Holy Spirit. One of the things the Apostles' decision did was to make known to the world that God's saving love reaches out to all people through Jesus Christ. I see a hint of that same idea in today's second reading from the Book of Revelation. During the Easter season this year, we hear from the Book of Revelations. The Book reminds us of the heavenly kingdom which we all hope to be part of some day. It will be a kingdom free from suffering, pain and death and there will be eternal happiness. Today's reading describes God's kingdom as a great city, known as the heavenly Jerusalem. One of the details of this description focuses on the gates into the heavenly city. Notice they face in all directions, north, south, east and west. It's a way of saying that God is inviting people from everywhere to enter. God wants to fill his house with guests. Unfortunately, in many other places in the Scriptures, we learn of those who choose not to be there.

This leads into our gospel which was taken from Jesus' words at the Last Supper according to John. Jesus had just told his apostles that soon he would reveal himself to his apostles but not to the world. One of the apostles asked what that meant. This is where our gospel begins. Jesus answered, "whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." Perhaps Jesus could have added, "we will make our dwelling with him in this life and he (or she) will make his or her dwelling with me in my Father's house in the next life."

When I was reading this passage earlier about Jesus revealing himself, I always tend to think if God or Jesus revealed himself to me, I could love him more. But in these statements of Jesus, he is telling us loving him has to precede his revealing himself to us. As Jesus said right before this gospel, "Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father and I will love him and reveal myself to him." First comes loving him, and then comes seeing him. There is one more piece to this process. First has to come obedience. Jesus said, "whoever loves me will keep my word." In other words, love is not some nice warm fuzzy feeling, it's a practical, down to earth thing. It's more what we do than what we feel. Our culture pays attention only to the feeling part of love and that's why many people have forgotten that love involves the things we do toward God and to each other. There is the road map to the heavenly Jerusalem that Jesus is giving to us today: first is the way of obedience, which leads to love which leads to his revealing himself to us and our dwelling with him for eternity. May the Holy Spirit guide us there. Amen.

Feast of the Ascension - C Cycle May 12, 2013

INTRODUCTION: (*Acts 1,1-11; Ephesians 1, 17-23; Luke 24, 40-53*) St. Luke gave us two books in the New Testament: The Acts of the Apostles and, of course, his gospel. We hear from both of them today. The gospel ends with the Ascension and the Acts of the Apostles begins with the Ascension. You'll notice when you hear the first reading from the Acts, he refers to his gospel as his "first book." It is interesting to notice that he treats the Ascension in two different ways in each of these two books. In the Acts he said the Ascension occurred 40 days after Easter, while at the end of his gospel he describes how Jesus appeared to his apostles Easter Sunday night, spoke with them, ate with them and then, on Easter Sunday night, he led them out to Bethany where he ascended into heaven. Any explanation as to why Luke described the Ascension as happening on two separate occasions is simply a guess. My own guess is that Jesus made a number of appearances to various individuals or groups during the approximately 40 days following his resurrection, but those appearances pretty much ceased after 40 days. From that time on, Jesus was present to his followers through the power of the Word as preached by the Apostles, through miracles, through the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, and the Church. St. Luke, in his second work, the Acts of the Apostles, describes Jesus' invisible presence with his followers.

HOMILY: One Mother's Day morning, two young children told their mother to stay in bed. As she lay there looking forward to being brought breakfast in bed, the smell of bacon floated up from the kitchen. Finally, the children called her to come downstairs. She found them both sitting at the table eating bacon and eggs. "As a surprise for Mother's Day," one explained, "we decided to fix our own breakfast." That's sometimes the way life goes for a mother.

Happy Mother's Day to all of the mothers who are with us today. Thank you for choosing the vocation you did and for the dedication and love you freely gave in following that vocation. I was blest with two mothers: my mother, Alice, who brought me into this world, with whom I was very close and who died when I was 14 years old. My second mother was Rosella whom my father married after Alice died. At 14 I was busy with high school activities and was testing my independence as teenagers do. Then right after high school, I was off to live at the seminary. Consequently, I didn't get quite as close to Rosella as I did with my biological mother. But I know Rosella was a loving and caring person who took good care of my younger siblings. So today I thank God for the two really good mothers I had and I thank God for the good mothers who are here today and for whom we are praying.

Besides being Mother's Day, today is also the feast of the Ascension of our Lord (a feast sometimes confused with the assumption of Mary – which is celebrated on August 15th). This feast was always celebrated 40 days after Easter, until the year 2000, when it was transferred to Sunday. The issue is not when the Ascension happened. The important thing is the lessons it teaches us. I want to mention three of these lessons.

(One) It gives us an understanding of who Jesus is. I was lately struck by the image of Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father. We say it in the Creed every Sunday. Paul tells us also in today's second reading of Jesus seated at God's right hand. Many people here remember the days when children were taught to stand up if an adult entered the room. Even today no one in a big corporation would think of walking into their bosses' office, pull up a chair and sit down, unless they were invited to (and certainly they would not move a chair next to their boss and sit down). Certainly in the culture of Jesus, one stood in the presence of a person who was their superior. When Jesus entered the presence of his Father, he sat at his right hand, a symbol of equality with his Father. That, of course, is our theology: Jesus is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father (consubstantial means he is of the same substance, the same divine nature, as the Father). **(Two)** The Ascension gives us an understanding of our own destiny. God didn't put us in this world to live forever; he made us in order for us to be with him forever. Where he has gone, we hope to follow. St. Augustine says: "out of compassion for us he descended from heaven, and although he ascended alone, we also ascend, because we are in him by grace." (*Reading for the feast of the Ascension.*) Jesus said to his apostles at the Last Supper: "I go to prepare a place for you and then I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (*John 14, 2-3*) **(Three)** The Ascension also gives us an understanding of our responsibilities. He said to the Apostles, "you will be my witnesses." They were,

but there are many others in the world today who need to know about Jesus. Who is going to proclaim the good news of God's love to them? Dead apostles? Living people have to proclaim the good news, and it's not just up to priests and nuns. There aren't enough of us to go around. Christ's plan on getting out his message is to have his followers pass it on to others, and he didn't have a backup plan. These are three lessons today's feast teaches us: who Jesus is, what our destiny is, and that our job is witnessing to God's love. There are more but I think this is enough to think about for today.

Vigil of Pentecost – C Cycle May 19, 2013

INTRODUCTION: There are eleven possible readings for the feast of Pentecost, six for the vigil and five for the feast itself. On Sunday there is a special sequence before the gospel. Only Easter and Pentecost have a special sequence that is required and Corpus Christi has an optional one. Today is indeed a special feast, the third most important feast in the Church year, the feast that celebrates the completion of Jesus' saving work with his sending of the Holy Spirit. Thanks to those who wore red, the color of the Holy Spirit.

Our first reading today is from Genesis. The story follows the story of the great flood. Those who survived the flood intended to make sure they would be able to escape floods in the future, so they decided to build a high tower. Notice a little satire here. In their pride, they are going to build a tower up to the heavens and God decides to "come down" to see what's going on. He confuses their speech to put an end to their prideful building project. God does not want to divide people but to unite them. In the account of Pentecost, in a passage that is read Sunday from the Acts of the Apostles, that's exactly what he does as he gives the apostles a special gift of tongues so that people from every nation would understand the message of God's universal love that they were preaching.

HOMILY: Two hundred years ago this year, a man was born named Antoine Frederic Ozanam. He was a distinguished scholar, a journalist, a doctor of law, a doctor of letters and a professor of law as well as a professor of foreign literature at the Sorbonne in Paris. In his short life (of 40 years) as a professor, a father and a husband, he managed to found a society to help the poor, the Conference of Charity, which today is known as the society of St. Vincent de Paul. St. Vincent de Paul was a French saint who dedicated himself to helping the poor 200 years before **Blessed** Frederic Ozanam was born. I call Ozanam blessed because Pope John Paul declared him blessed in 1997, the last step before sainthood. Why do I tell you this? Not just because it's the 200th anniversary of his birth, but also because it is one example of the Holy Spirit at work. The Spirit inspired Frederic Ozanam, a layman, to live a life of learning, scholarship and holiness. We have a parish that generously supports a food pantry and generous volunteers who help distribute the food on Saturday afternoon. That is how

the Spirit inspires a lot of people (donors and workers) to help over 100 people monthly who need help.

I have a success story I would like to tell you from our St. Vincent de Paul work. There was a man named Rodney who came in for food. He was an ex-con who had put in his time. One time when he came in he asked Kathleen, who works in the food pantry, for a skillet. When she was shopping later in the week, she bought one and gave it to him. This fired up his interest in cooking. He joined a cooking class at the Freestore and in a short time he became such a good cook that he is now the kitchen manager at the Freestore and works there also as liaison between P & G and the Freestore. His story has inspired some of his buddies who were down and out to realize they too could improve their lot in life. I see this story also as the work of the Spirit inspiring Kathleen to go out and get a \$9.00 skillet for one of the people who came to our pantry.

Jesus spoke many times about the Holy Spirit. One thing he said that always struck me as strange is when he said, "it is better for you that I go, for if I do not go the Holy Spirit will not come to you." (Jn 16,7) Surely the apostles wondered, as I did, how could anything be an advantage, how could anything be better for them if Jesus were to leave them. As we now know, Jesus didn't really leave them, rather he remained with them through the Holy Spirit he sent them. Here is one of the advantages of having the Holy Spirit. Jesus physically could not be everywhere, but through the Spirit, Jesus could be touching the hearts and minds of all seven billion people in the world today, if they were all receptive to his Spirit.

It is hard to imagine the Holy Spirit for the Holy Spirit chooses to stay out of the spotlight and prefers to work behind the scenes. The Spirit is with us now when we come together in faith and prayer. The Spirit helps us to listen to God's word. We pray for the Spirit to change bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. The Spirit guides the Church, and the Church still survives even when the Church leaders and members do not always let themselves be guided by the Spirit. The Spirit blesses our inner spirits with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control, gifts that Paul lists in Galatians (5, 22 & 23). With all that the Spirit does, what does the Spirit not do? The Spirit does not force us. God gave us a free will and the Spirit does not take that away. The Spirit inspires us to move in God's direction, but it's our choice whether or not we do so. The Spirit guides and inspires the whole Church and the Spirit guides and inspires each one of us individually. In (Sunday's) gospel we hear Jesus say the Spirit "will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you." That is one of the ways I have experienced the Spirit working in my life, reminding me what I should do, how I should live, and helping the Scriptures come alive for me. Sometimes in counseling I have experienced an idea coming into my head that was just the right thing to say to a person and I end up asking myself, "where did that idea come from?" For a long time all I ever knew of the Spirit was he would help us when we had to take a test. Here too the Spirit helps, but the Spirit also teaches us to be responsible, and I've found if I didn't do my homework, the Spirit wasn't going to whisper the answers in my ears. If we had another hour, I couldn't say everything that could be said about the Spirit. Just open you own heart to the Spirit and discover the blessings the

Spirit can bring. Jesus promised the Father would send the Spirit to those who ask him for the Holy Spirit. (Lk, 11,14)

Feast of the Holy Trinity – C Cycle May 26, 2013

INTRODUCTION: *Prov. 8,22-31; Romans 5,1-5; John 16,12-15*

There are a number of books in the Old Testament called wisdom books. The books discuss topics such as the meaning of life or the meaning of suffering as well as practical ideas on how to raise children or how to handle your money. Sometimes wisdom is pictured as a person; for example, wisdom is often pictured as a woman who tirelessly tries to lead people away from foolishness and sin. In today's reading from Proverbs, wisdom is described as a person who was with God before creation and who helped God create the world. This is not to be understood as a reference to the Trinity. It was Christ who revealed the mystery of the Trinity and the Book of Proverbs was composed about 500 years before Christ. With our present theology of the Trinity, however, we can see a vague foreshadowing of what was to be revealed at a later time in the teachings of Jesus.

HOMILY

I'm sure most people here have read a mystery novel or watched a movie about a murder mystery. As the story moves on, we keep getting information about the characters and we get clues that encourage us to try to figure out the mystery. Usually a good mystery, if it's well done, never allows us to figure out the ending until the end – then it all fits together and makes sense.

We are faced with several mysteries as a part of our faith. We are given various pieces of information about the mystery, but it doesn't all fit together yet. Someday it will when we know God more fully and completely, but we're still working on that.

The one piece of information we have about God is that there is only one God. In a culture where people worshipped multiple gods, sometimes in the hundreds, God insisted on the Jews undivided loyalty. In those days, people believed that gods were local. For example, if you lived in Egypt, the Egyptian gods held power. If you lived in Babylon, the Babylonian gods held power. But for Israel, no matter where they traveled, their God was the God over all gods. God's covenant with them was "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange God's before me." Before the Babylonian exile (in 587 B.C.), the Jews may have believed that some of the other gods of other nations were real, even if not as powerful as their God. Eventually, the Jews became convinced that all the other gods were just a piece of wood or stone or metal and were nothing at all. It was a hard lesson for the Jews to learn, but they finally caught on after the Babylonian exile.

The next piece of information we have about God is what Jesus revealed to us. He showed he had amazing power, he was an outstanding teacher, he had power over evil,

he showed infinite love, he had authority to forgive sins and give an authoritative interpretation of God's law, and he had this special relationship with God whom he called Father. All these things showed he was someone more than human. However, when he rose from the dead, ascended to heaven and was seated at the right hand of the Father, his followers recognized him as God and worshipped him as God. It was difficult for the early believers to understand how God could be one, yet they could not deny their experience of Jesus as Son of the Most High, the Son of God, the Savior whose kingdom would last forever as the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary, his mother. Moreover, the letters of Paul and the gospel of John spoke of a third divine personality who regularly descended upon the believers and brought to them marvelous spiritual gifts.

Although the letters of Paul and the gospels were written in the first century and a simple creed, which we know as the Apostles Creed, took shape in those early years, it took many years of debate, anguish and even bloodshed before Christ's followers were able to formally and officially define their faith in this mystery of the Trinity. The term "trinity" came about in the early 200's, a word coined by Tertullian, but the final definition of our faith came about at the Council on Nicea in 325 and at the Council of Constantinople in 381. The profession of faith that came out of these two councils is prayed every Sunday in the Creed.

So there you have the mystery of the Trinity. The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet, there is only one God. If I tried to explain it to you, like some theologians have tried, you would walk out of here not knowing any more than when you came in. That's not because you would not be smart enough, it's because I would be incapable of explaining it. So, today I'll spare you any attempt to explain the Trinity. Maybe next year I may attempt to explain it somewhat. If it's so profound, I have been asked, why does God want us to know anything about it at all? I'm sure it's for the same reason any lover reveals himself or herself to the person they love. God wants us to know him, to love him and to serve him. Our knowledge of the Trinity allows us to know him just a little better, even if we don't fully understand him yet. Some day we shall see God as God is, St. Paul tells us. We shouldn't be surprised that we don't fully understand God, because there are many things in this universe that we are still discovering. It stands to reason then that the creator of all that is, the Ultimate Reality, is the greatest mystery of all. Amen.