

4th Sunday in Lent

March 2, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Sight is a wonderful gift, but what we see with our mind and heart is even of greater value. God helps us to see clearly. We have examples of that inner vision in all of today's readings. Our first reading takes us back 1000 years before Christ when the prophet Samuel had to choose a king from among the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem. They all had the dignity and physical characteristics of potentially good leaders, but God knew who would make the best king. Paul tells us we have been enlightened by Christ and in the gospel we hear how a man born blind not only had his eyes opened by Christ but his heart, whereas those who claimed to be able to see were blinded by arrogance.

HOMILY

Two weeks ago, I appealed to all of our parishioners for their support of the Catholic Ministries Appeal. It is going well. We are about \$2500 short of our \$15,000 goal. I am most grateful to all who have responded. There has been one item that a few people have been confused about. In past years, at this time of the year, we have had the Archdiocesan Fund Drive. Some are wondering if another appeal is coming next. The answer is: No!

I wanted to make another appeal to you today, not for money, but for your involvement at Mass. You might have noticed that last week and this week we've been singing some hymns you might not have heard for years, such as All the Earth Proclaim the Lord; Yes, I Shall Arise; My Soul is Longing for Your Peace. Next week you will hear them again. I have asked Don to schedule these pieces in testimony to their composer: Fr. Lucien Deiss. Fr. Deiss died about five months ago and he was a pioneer in composing liturgical music 45 years ago as the language of the Mass was going from Latin to English. He was also a scholar in Sacred Scripture and Patristics (that is the study of the early Fathers of the Church). I had the opportunity to attend a workshop by him when I was first ordained and I was deeply impressed. Much of his music is no longer in use today (except for Keep in Mind) but I thought his passing should not go unnoticed.

I thought I would take this occasion as we remember him, to stress the importance of music at Mass. I've told you my story about when I was a child, whenever we had singing practice, the good sisters in school encouraged me to listen. They said that way I would learn to sing if I listened to the others. It wasn't until I was 20 or 21 that our choir director in the seminary called me aside after chant practice and offered to give me individual lessons in singing. I think it helped. The point I'm trying to make is that if you think you can't sing, you'll never learn how if you don't try. Sometimes people say to me I don't know that hymn we had today. But if a person doesn't try to sing it they'll never know it. I don't know if people have ever noticed but the hymns we choose try to correspond to the liturgical season and the theme of the readings. Hopefully, if

a hymn is unfamiliar, over the course of time we will become more comfortable with it. We'll never learn any new ones any other way. I know that musical tastes vary. Some people like the more traditional ones and others like the more modern ones, some people like the slow, prayerful ones and some like those with a fast, lively beat. Don tries to vary them, I know. The important thing is that they represent quality music. But sometimes good music is not always appreciated right away. While I was on vacation, I watched a movie on the life of Cole Porter. There was a comment he made in the movie that struck me. He said "I often get paid much less for a really good piece of music than I get paid for that that's not very good." As with many other things in life, popularity does not represent quality and vice-versa. And the music we use should be good quality.

When everyone sings, the prayer is uplifting and energizing. Singing gets a person more involved and engaged in the Mass. And the time seems to go by quickly. I noticed when I can't sing (like if I have a sore throat), the time goes much more slowly. Maybe this is what St. Augustine meant when he said: "he who sings, prays twice." We put more of ourselves into the prayer when we sing. I have two suggestions: if people would more up further in church, they could support one another with their singing and this would give more a sense of community. The other suggestion is to open your hymn book to the hymn and if you can't sing it or don't feel comfortable even trying, just read the words that are being sung, for they are a prayer. That's all I'll say. The more involved you are in the Mass, the more a blessing it will be for you. Amen.

5th Sunday in Lent

March 9, 2008

HOMILY: Bertrand Russell said: success is getting what you want; happiness is wanting what you get. I don't think many of us wanted all this snow, but what Bertrand Russell said implies that we do our best to adjust to the ups and downs of life. Thank God we have our faith to help us along the way and to give us hope.

The greatest hope we have is that life will never end.

Today's gospels is one of my very favorite ones, because it was while I was visiting the tomb of Lazarus in Bethany that I had an overwhelming experience of the divine presence of Jesus.

Jesus said to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Who could make such a statement: "everyone who lives and believes in me will never die?" They would either have to be someone so unique and special, the likes of which this world has never known, or they would have to be someone severely delusional. From everything else we know about Jesus, he was totally sane and in touch with reality. More than that he was someone with special wisdom and

special powers. He did not just ask for Martha's faith, "do you believe this?" but he did more, he showed he had power even over death itself. Who else has the power to make the tombs empty? The Lord asks us today as he asked Martha: "Do you believe this?" "Do you believe that everyone who lives and believes in me will never die?" What a comfort this is when we lose a loved one whom we know has lived and died in God's grace.

But Jesus' words are not limited to the experience of death. We all experience many losses in life, little deaths, things that we have to grieve for. It could be our health, our job, our security or the loss of something that meant a lot to us. We have to trust somehow that even in these sufferings God can bring life out of death. This is what is meant by the Easter mystery, or the Paschal mystery that we are preparing to celebrate. As St. Paul tells us: "We know that all things work for good for those who love God." Rom 8,28.

This is the hope that I live by and that gives new life to all of us. Amen.

Passion Sunday

March 16, 2008

Without the resurrection, Jesus' life and ministry would have been a total disaster. Sure he taught profound truths, he healed the sick, he drove out demons, but all his good work would have come to a frustrating and disappointing end. Nothing would have come of all that he did. It's not likely his followers who all deserted him, except for John and a few women, would have ever mentioned his name again except among themselves. We would probably never have heard of him or of the message of love that he preached. He died an accused criminal by one of the most painful forms of death ever invented by human beings. He was a victim of hatred, power, jealousy, and greed.

In a lesser way, at times other people's lives seem to end in failure. A good person may die and be quickly forgotten. Or it may happen that no matter how hard a person tries, no matter how much good they do, a tragedy occurs, one's efforts seem to go unrewarded, something happens that a person's reputation is destroyed, a lifetime relationship falls apart and the good things a person has done is buried with them. Shakespeare's words about Julius Caesar have described the lives of so much of suffering humanity: "the evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones."

Shakespeare's words would have been true of Jesus too, regarding the few who knew him, if there had not been a resurrection. But the story of Jesus is not over; our stories are never over either. This week we will follow the journey of Jesus through disaster and death to resurrection and new life. To help us as we make that journey we are given his body and blood as our food and drink to nourish us and give us life - his risen life. If we follow him with faith our stories of

love and good works can be as his story was, a story of love poured out that cannot be overcome by failure, a story of life that is not overcome by death. Amen.

Easter

March 23, 2008

Children say the darndest things. When a family with a small child showed up at church on Easter Sunday, the little child wondered why all the decorations and flowers. His mother explained that we were celebrating Jesus' resurrection after he died on the cross. The child exclaimed "Jesus died!? Jesus died!? When did that happen? Why didn't you tell me?" (They must have missed Mass on Palm Sunday).

At an Easter Sunday Mass in church, a mother heard her five-year-old daughter singing joyfully "lasagna in the highest!"

A father told about his little four-year-old's excitement over what the Easter bunny would bring on Easter. The father asked if his son knew what Easter was really about. The very bright little boy answered: "Jesus died on the cross, so we can live with him in heaven some day." Then he added: "But I don't want to die." The father said, everyone has to die sometime, but we hope it will not be for a long time." The boy replied: "okay, but if there's no TV in heaven, I'm leaving."

Last year at this time James Cameron, director of the movie Titanic, produced a program for the Discovery Channel entitled The Lost Tomb of Jesus. It seems that in 1980 there were several first century caskets or bone boxes found in a tomb outside of Jerusalem and one of them had the inscription on it: Jesus son of Joseph. The dead person's bones were still in the casket. From other bits of information connected with this particular casket, Mr. Cameron concluded that he had discovered Jesus' body and he modestly proclaimed this was the "greatest archaeological find of all time." Like the famous ship in his movie Titanic, it wasn't long before Mr. Cameron's boast about the "greatest archaeological find of all time" ran into an iceberg and began to sink. Expert archaeologists from around the world who had examined the casket and the tomb cast strong doubt on the so-called discovery of Jesus' dead body and the sensation created by the program began to fade.

All through the centuries people have tried to explain away the resurrection of Jesus, beginning with the Roman soldiers who were sent to guard the tomb and who claimed they fell asleep while they were on guard and the apostles came and stole Jesus' body. Any one can easily see the contradiction in this. The resurrection of Jesus is a matter of faith, for no one witnessed it, except perhaps the Roman guards who were paid to tell a different story.

My faith in the resurrection has been a great source of strength and comfort for me. However, I do not believe simply because that faith brings me comfort. My faith rests on two pieces of solid

evidence: first, an empty tomb over which Constantine built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in 335 A.D. and which has been and still is venerated as the tomb of Jesus right from the beginning. And secondly, the testimony of Jesus' followers who had nothing to gain from proclaiming Jesus' resurrection except their own martyrdom. They would never have had the courage to preach about Jesus and the world would never have heard of him if Jesus hadn't risen and appeared to them many times and if the Holy Spirit hadn't come to them.

Our belief too, as St. Paul tells us, is not only that Jesus rose from the dead to live in eternal glory, but it is a glory we hope to share with him some day. No matter how powerful and final is the force of death, because of Jesus' resurrection, we Christians believe that life has the final word – not death and it is life eternal. This is why St. Paul tells us to “think of what is above, not what is on earth.” Of course we have to provide for our everyday needs and, in love, provide for the needs of our brothers and sisters in this world, but we have to avoid living only for this world. Our Mass each week helps to stay focused on what Jesus did for us and what is ahead for us if we remain faithful to him.

Please make the Mass something more than a once or twice a year event. So much happens in our busy lives that we need to be guided weekly, if not more often, with the word of God and nourished with the body and blood of Christ who died and rose for us. Amen.