

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2009

INTRODUCTION: Last week I spoke about how Peter and John healed a crippled beggar in the Temple. The healed man jumped up and down and was walking around which caused a great amount of commotion in the Temple. The people wanted to know what happened and how it had happened. Peter gave all the credit to Jesus who, in his risen presence, healed the man through the Apostles. When the Jewish religious leaders, many of whom did not believe in any kind of resurrection, heard Peter's witness, they arrested Peter and John and took them to court. Today we hear a portion of Peter's testimony. The important thing to notice is not only what Peter had to say about Jesus but also his boldness. The court didn't know what to do with Peter and John because all the people were excited about the healing of a man who had been lame for over 40 years. So the court warned the Apostles not to talk about Jesus any more. The Apostles would not be intimidated, however, for they were now filled with the Holy Spirit. [Acts 4, 8-12]

HOMILY: Jesus tells us: "I am the good shepherd." Today is often called Good Shepherd Sunday because every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we hear a passage from St. John's 10th chapter [Jn. 10, 11-18] which is about Jesus as our shepherd.

Today Jesus tells us about two kinds of shepherds. There is the kind of shepherd who owns his or her own sheep and there are shepherds who are hired by a farmer to protect and care for sheep that belong to someone else. The second kind, the hired shepherds, run away when danger comes, while those who own their sheep fight hard to protect what is their own, sometimes getting hurt badly or even getting killed. Jesus is telling us he would be killed to protect and save us, but he would return to life again – which he did. This shows us, first of all, how much he cares for us. He would fight to the bitter end for us. It also shows us how powerful he is that he can lay down his life and take it up again. Peter tells us in today's second reading that Jesus is the only one we can safely follow in order to be saved,.

Jesus tells us something else about shepherds today - they know their sheep and the sheep know their shepherds. It's just the same way we know our pets at home. How do they know one another so well – because they spend a lot of time together. Sheep take a lot of care and the shepherd is with his or her sheep 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Jesus is with us all the time and knows us better than we know ourselves (all the hairs on our heads are numbered – do any of us know ourselves that well?) If we don't know him very well, we need to spend more time with him; and that's called prayer.

When I think of shepherds, I always remember 20 years ago when I climbed Mt. Sinai (I'm glad I did it then, because I couldn't do it any more – it's very rugged and steep) and on the way down, I saw a shepherd and her sheep on a near-by hill. It was just getting dark. She started playing her flute and headed in a direction away from where we were; the sheep just fell in line following her. It was all the sheep trusted her knew how much they depended on her. It was a beautiful

scene.

The metaphor is obvious. Christ is our shepherd. He wants us to trust him and follow him. Sometimes following him can get a little frightening; we don't know where he's taking us or what he might ask of us. Sometimes when he takes us through the desert, as shepherds need to do at times when they want to bring their sheep to better grazing ground, we ask why is he doing this to us? That's why he is always telling us we need to have faith in him. That's also why we need to pray - so we will have faith in him. Amen.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 10, 2009

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 Roman name and a Jewish name. Thus 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. On one occasion, as he was on his way to Damascus to search out Christians and arrest them, Jesus appeared to him. He immediately discovered Christians had it right and what he was doing was entirely wrong. His life turned around completely and he began preaching and teaching about Jesus. Even after three years in and around 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, the disciples were afraid to trust him. Barnabas was a disciple they did trust and he testified that Paul was genuine. The Hellenists, in the first reading, were Greek speaking Jews who saw Paul as a traitor to Judaism.

HOMILY Happy Mothers' Day to all our mothers. Friday we had May crowning and so the statue of Mary is still here to remind us of Mary, our spiritual mother, today too. On a Mother's Day card, a six year-old girl wrote her Mother: "Dear Mom, I'm going to make lunch for you on Mother's day. It's going to be a surprise. P.S. I hope you like pizza and popcorn."

In a recent comic strip, For Better or For Worse, Elly, a young mom, had a horrible day caring for her two toddlers who were sick. Looking for sympathy, Elly called her own mother looking for an understanding ear. She told her mom what a horrible 24 hours she had, getting up every half hour during the night and caring for her toddlers all day – first one, then the other. She said to her mom "you don't even get a chance to think about yourself." Then she added I guess you went through all this with me and my brother, didn't you?" There was a pause, then Elly said to her mom, "Er, Mom...did we ever thank you?" "Thanks" is in order constantly, but especially today. Thank you mothers for your love and unselfish dedication and patience. Without you the world would come to a screeching halt.

Jesus is telling us today, without him, all of our lives would go nowhere. He tells us: "Without me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither." When we grow up and leave home, our love and our connection with our parents may remain with us, but we are really on our own. It can never be that way with Jesus. We need our Lord when we're 60 or 70 as much as when we're 6 or 7. We need him all the time. If we reflect deeply, we know there is a power greater than ourselves that we depend on and that we constantly need to sustain us. We are connected with that power through Jesus, the true vine.

The prophets, hundreds of years before Christ, used the vineyard as an image of Israel. Just as a farmer would cultivate his vineyard and care for it and expect to harvest grapes from it, so God would care for his people and expect good works from them: devout worship, obedience to his commandments, justice and love for the poor and vulnerable. Jesus is telling us today that through our union with him we are God's people.

Jesus has tried to tell us that in many ways. I would like to mention just five statements where Jesus uses metaphors that tell us how important it is that we remain united with him. Notice each of these begins with the words: "I am." Last Sunday we heard him tell us "I am the good shepherd." "I am the light of the world." "I am the bread of life." "I am the resurrection and the life." And the fifth one we heard today: "I am the true vine." If we had time we could reflect upon how vital each of these items is: shepherds for sheep, light and food for us, the vine for one of its branches. Since vine and branches is the theme of today's gospel, let us stay with that image for just another few minutes.

Quite simply, a vine is an organic structure that is nurtured by the rain and the sun; it is fed by the sap that flows through the stem and the branches; it grows and produces fruit. Jesus tells us he is the true vine, drawing life from the Father and communicating that life to all those who remain united with him. In other words there is a mysterious, living connection between each of us and Christ and a mysterious and living connection uniting us with one another through our union with Christ.

St. Paul used a similar metaphor when he wrote that we are the body of Christ. He tells us Christ is head of the body and we are the members. We are feet, hands, arms, legs, etc. through whom Christ lives in the world today. We are united with Christ and with each other through the Spirit. Pope Pius XII wrote an encyclical called the Mystical Body of Christ describing this union. This is not a connection we can examine under a microscope or test for in any other way, other than the test Jesus gave us when he said "by their fruits you will know them." The way we live our lives shows whether we live in Christ or not.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 17, 2009

INTRODUCTION: The issue in today's first reading (Acts 10, 25-26,34-35,44-48) is how the Apostles (who were Jews) should deal with Gentiles (who were pagans) when these Gentiles came to believe in Jesus. The Apostles believed God revealed his law to Moses. Shouldn't pagan converts to Jesus be required to also follow all that was in the Jewish law: circumcision, strict dietary laws, special feast days, etc.?

St. Peter, the leader of the community, received 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, shrimp, clams, oysters and many other creatures. (Lev. 11,1-23) 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 said this three times to Peter. 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 high officer in the Roman army. 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 gave the order that they should be baptized.

HOMILY: (2nd Reading: I Jn: 4,7-10; Gospel: Jn 15,9-17) Probably for most people it may seem like we celebrated Easter two months ago. But the Church continues to celebrate it. Our daily Masses and prayers all reflect an Easter theme and they are filled with Alleluia's. Liturgically it's a beautiful time of the year. We will celebrate Easter for two more weeks.

Every Easter I can't help wondering why Jesus offers us a share in his risen life, why God wants us to live with him forever. Why doesn't God just forget us? In this immense universe God created, we are so small. Why should God go to all the trouble he did to bring us eternal life? Maybe we've never asked ourselves these questions. Maybe we think we are such charming, wonderful creatures that God can't help loving us. Well, we know we humans are not always such wonderful, charming individuals, but it is true that God can't help loving us because that's the way God is. God is love St. John tells us in today's second reading. Just like the sun has to shine because that's what the sun does, God loves us because that's what God does. Yet in spite of our imperfections, God's love reaches out to all people. This was the big revelation we heard about in today's first reading. The Jews presumed they had a monopoly on God's love. Indeed, they did have a monopoly in that God gave them the special gift of his revelation before the time of Jesus, but Jesus fulfilled all that had gone before and revealed that God is calling all

people to know his saving love.

We need to know that even though God can't help loving us, because God is love, we will never know the joy he wants to share with us, unless we follow the path he has marked out for us. In today's gospel he tells us, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete." But just like the clouds can block the light of the sun, our sins, our indifference, our neglect can get in the way of God's love that is there for us. He has told us what we need to do. He summed it up in his new commandment: "Love one another as I love you." This is called a new commandment because previously he told us to love our neighbor as ourselves. That's possible for any of us to do, but being able to love as Jesus does, to "love one another as I have loved you..." that's really asking a lot. Jesus is God. Can we love like God does? We can, but only with the help of his Holy Spirit who dwells in us and who seeks to transform us into being like Christ.

One of the ways he has loved us is that he laid down his life for us. Can we do that for someone? Many people do. We read about heroes all the time who have risked their lives for someone else. There are people who have dedicated their lives to a job or a vocation where they are less interested in getting rich than they are in doing good for others. I asked the school children in our upper grades yesterday "who would be willing to give up their life for another person?" Only one girl raised her hand. When I asked them if you saw a friend crossing the street and there was a car coming they didn't see it, would you risk your life to run into the street to push them out of the way? Quite a number would. I think many of us are more Christ-like than we imagine ourselves to be. I can't help but mention those who sacrifice their time and energy to serve those who are the most vulnerable in society - the poor, the aged and the unborn.

We have to know that when Jesus talks about "love" he's not talking about the mating instinct, which is good but which is too often exploited in the media as the only kind of love that has any importance. Jesus is talking about giving of ourselves for the benefit of another as he did for us. When he talks about "love," he's not just talking about warm fuzzy feelings, which come and go, but he is talking about a dedication and commitment to serve God and others. When he's talking about "love," he's not talking about always speaking of love; he's talking about action: "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my heavenly father." Words are important and I think married couples should tell each other they love each other and they should do it all the time, but love is more than words.

Love is the key to everything: it explains why God created us, it explains why Jesus came to earth, it explains why God wants us to live with him forever, it explains the Mass we celebrate, and it explains how we are to act toward one another. Amen.