

Good Friday

April 2, 2010

Every day we gather around this altar to celebrate the Eucharist. In the Eucharist God's love is shown to us through Jesus Christ who gave his life for us on the cross. So he can share his life with us now, he continues to give us his body and blood. The gift of his life involved immense suffering on his part. Our gospels do not dwell long on his sufferings. They didn't need to because the people who lived at the time the gospels were written knew what crucifixion involved. It was one of the most agonizing forms of execution that human beings had ever concocted. On this one day of the year, out of respect for what Jesus went through, we do not celebrate the Eucharist as we do every other day. Instead we have a rather extended service of reflection, intercessions, and Communion.

Rather than focusing on the physical sufferings of Jesus, I would like to reflect on the mystery of suffering itself. The book of Genesis attributes suffering to sin. The first man and woman God created lost the happiness God had intended for them because of their disobedience to God. The whole first part of the Old Testament, Deuteronomy, Judges, Samuel and Kings and many of the prophets reflects this notion of suffering - that it is caused by disobedience to God. There is some truth in that notion, but it is not the whole story as the Book of Job tells us. Without telling us why good people suffer, the Book of Job took issue with the old theology on suffering. Sometime about 500 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah gave us a new way of thinking about suffering - that it can have a positive purpose - that one person's suffering can bring blessings to another. We heard it clearly expressed in today's first reading from a passage in Isaiah known as the 4th Servant Song. I would like to repeat some phrases from our first reading; they are so powerful. God's Servant, Isaiah says, "was spurned and avoided by people, a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity...Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured...he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed...though he had done no wrong nor spoken any falsehood, the Lord was pleased to crush him in infirmity... he shall take away the sins of many and win pardon for their offenses."

It is easy to see in a family how one person's sufferings can benefit another person. For example, how parents make sacrifices for their children, how they have to go through difficult times to support those they love and teach them and discipline them. The sufferings of Jesus, however, were a scandal to his followers. The Messiah was not expected to suffer. We remember when Jesus tried to warn his disciples that he would "suffer greatly and be killed and would rise again." Peter replied, "Heaven forbid, Lord, this will never happen to you." Jesus response to Peter is familiar to all of us: "Get behind me, Satan."

Why did he have to suffer? I have asked myself that question many times and others have asked me that question many times as well. My current thinking on this is I think he had to suffer because of who he was. He was God's Son who came among a sinful people. He could not be anything other than who he was and, without redemption, we could not be anything other than

who we are. He was like a lamb dropped into a tigers' cage. He was from above, we are from this world, his holiness did not fit in with our sinful ways. The only kingdom we could know was the kingdom of this world and his kingdom did not belong to this world. Thus he came to his own and his own received him not. Because he could not be other than who he was and because he was faithful to the purpose for which he came - his purpose being to confront the powers of evil, to heal and to teach us to change our lives and to live in a new way - conflict, confrontation, rejection and suffering were inevitable. Yet his sufferings led to his resurrection and glorification. Jesus has "passed through the heavens," as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, to take his rightful place at God's right hand. But he has not left us, rather through his Spirit, through prayer and the sacraments and through his love in us he has transformed us and made us sharers in his new life. He has made us into a new creation. "He has become the source of eternal life for all who obey him," the Letter to the Hebrews tells us. Or as Isaiah tells us: "By his stripes we were healed." Amen.

Easter

April 4, 2010

A pastor was telling some of the little children in school about Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. As he was teaching them about some of Jesus' last words on the cross, he asked: "What was the last thing Jesus said before he died?" One little child raised his hand and answered, "Jesus said: 'I'll be back'."

It's not recorded that Jesus said that on the cross, but there were several times that Jesus did predict his resurrection. Evidently the Jewish religious leaders remembered Jesus' prediction. So that his apostles could not steal his body and then try to tell people he was raised from the dead, Matthew tells us that after Jesus was buried, the chief priests and Pharisees asked Pilate to provide a guard at Jesus' tomb. The Apostles, however, thought the idea of resurrection was ridiculous and they were dumbfounded by the reports of the women and by the fact that Jesus' body was gone from the tomb.

Except perhaps the Roman guard, no one saw Jesus rise. The guards were bribed into telling the story that they fell asleep, and while they were asleep the apostles stole Jesus' body. Many times artists, who have tried to picture the resurrection, show the soldiers sleeping, which is unfortunate because it inaccurately portrays what the resurrection might have been like. The story that the soldiers were asleep is a contradiction in itself, because if they were asleep how could they say what had happened. This is not to mention the fact that if a Roman soldier fell asleep on his watch he could have lost his life for dereliction of duty.

Since the empty tomb is so much a part of the gospel account of the resurrection, I would like to say a little more about the tomb. When I was in Israel, I had the good fortune of visiting Jesus' tomb at a time when there weren't many tourists around. I got to spend a considerable amount

of time praying there. There is strong evidence, based on the tradition of the Jerusalem Christian community, that the place we honor today in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as the tomb of Jesus is authentic. It was a place where the earliest Christians celebrated liturgies until the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. Then in 135 A.D. the emperor Hadrian filled in the area with tons of earth so he could build a temple to the goddess Aphrodite on that spot. Aphrodite's shrine remained there for 200 years until Constantine was converted and wanted to build a church to honor the place where Jesus was buried. The Christian community told him exactly where he would find Jesus' tomb. They pointed to the pagan temple and said Jesus' tomb is buried deep under that temple. In order to build his church, Constantine faced a double expense - he had to tear down the temple and then excavate the area. The Church historian and eyewitness Eusebius tells us in his Life of Constantine: "At once the work was carried out, and, as layer after layer of the subsoil came into view, the venerable and most holy memorial of the Savior's resurrection, beyond all our hopes, came into view." (from The Holy Land by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, pg 45).

An empty tomb, even with such a positive argument about its authenticity, does not give absolute evidence of the resurrection for the resurrection can be known only by faith. Our faith is based on the witness of those who saw Christ after the resurrection. These witnesses had nothing to gain materially from the witness they gave and many of them, as we know, backed up their witness by the sacrifice of lives. We must mention too that our faith is also based on the gift of the Holy Spirit that Jesus gives us. For it is only through the Spirit that we can come to believe.

We have a saying, "seeing is believing." Thomas the Apostle took that approach as we will hear next week. But for most of us, it's the other way around. As we believe in the risen Christ, we begin to see him active in our lives, helping us, comforting us, guiding us. As we believe in the risen Christ, we begin to see him in others. My faith in the resurrection of Christ gave me the great comfort of knowing I am never fully alone but that Christ is always with me. My faith in the risen Christ made me more willing to spend time with him in prayer.

The resurrection is not just a belief that we pull out at Easter or a comforting doctrine we console ourselves with at a time of death. It is a whole way of life, a life that begins with our baptism and is sustained by our gathering in faith with the risen Christ on this day of his resurrection, the first day of the week. It is a way of life in which we try to keep ourselves aware of his presence in us in all we say and do throughout the week.

Today we are reminded of a truth most basic to our faith. Today we rededicate ourselves to living that faith in union with our risen Lord so we may one day come to share fully in his risen life. Amen.

Second Sunday of Easter

April 11, 2010

INTRODUCTION (Acts 5, 12-16; Rev. 1, 9-11a.12-13.17-19; John 20, 19-31)

I want to start with some comments about our second reading. It is from the first chapter of the book of Revelation. I was discussing this book recently with a group of friends and one of them said that for him Revelations is the book he most dislikes in the Bible. He said it writes about so many terrible things happening. It does indeed, but throughout the book is all about hope . It was written during a time of severe persecution. Its message is that in the end evil would not prevail but Christ would be victorious over every form of evil. We will hear brief sections of this book for the next several weeks, sections that emphasize hope and salvation. John the Apostle, the author of Revelations, tells us in today's passage how the book came to be written. John was in exile on a little island called Patmos as punishment for preaching about Jesus. The risen Jesus appeared to him and began to reveal to him that those suffering for their faith in Jesus would share in Jesus' victory over evil and death.

Unfortunately, part of the powerful vision describing Jesus was left out of our reading today.

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles describes for us how the risen Christ continues his saving work through the Apostles and through the community of those who believed in him.

HOMILY

A mother took her little three year old son to Mass for the first time. The child got impatient waiting for Mass to start. Turning to his mother the boy asked, "When does Jesus get here?"

I wonder if this was what the Apostle Thomas was asking himself all week. The other Apostles had seen the Lord on Easter Sunday evening. Thomas, for one reason or another, missed out on this first appearance of Jesus to the Apostles. Jesus did not appear again until the following Sunday. It's not surprising that it was not until the following Sunday that Jesus appeared. In a very short time, Sunday became the day when those who believed in Christ would come together in prayer and in celebration of the Eucharist. I will say more about Thomas later.

I just want to point out a couple of other features about today's gospel that I think are particularly noteworthy. For me personally, the way Jesus greeted his Apostles proved to be extremely important: "Peace be with you." In my early years as a priest I experienced a lot of depression and I prayed for peace. Being aware that Christ wanted us to have peace in our hearts, I was able to pray for peace with absolute confidence that I would eventually experience it. The assurance that Christ wanted peace for us kept me from giving up on my prayer until I received a positive answer it.

The gospel goes on to show us Jesus sending his Apostles out in the power of the Spirit to bring Christ's peace to the world through the forgiveness of sins. Jesus said to them again: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me so I send you." Then he breathed his Spirit on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them..." Pope John Paul

was so inspired by this passage that he designated this Sunday as "Divine Mercy Sunday." It's not that this is the only time God offers his mercy to us, but it is a good time to reflect that God's mercy is always available to us whenever we turn to him for forgiveness. The sacrament of reconciliation, which Christ gave to the Church, is a great help to us to receive his peace and his mercy.

Also in today's gospel we hear the story of Thomas who was not there on Easter Sunday night. I always wonder what made him stay around and wait for what seemed an impossibility to him - that Jesus was truly risen. When the other Apostles told him they had seen the Lord why didn't he just walk out and say, "They're all out of their minds." Something made him stay - maybe the little faith he had left held him there; maybe he had to prove to himself that he was right and everyone else was crazy.

It was good that Thomas didn't walk away, for when Jesus appeared on the Sunday after Easter, he made an act of faith in Jesus that was more profound than anything that had been said of Jesus by any of the Apostles up to that time. It wasn't just an act of faith that Jesus had risen, for he could see that, but he professed Jesus was "My Lord and my God." We have the advantage of thinking of God in terms of the Trinity, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We may not understand the mystery but we have the terminology. The Apostles did not think in this theological terminology - at least not right away; it took time for them to accept that somehow the Father was God and at the same time Jesus was God, but Jesus was not the Father and yet there was only one God. So, knowing their limited knowledge, Thomas' act of faith was awesome; Thomas knew somehow that Jesus was God, the God the Jewish people had worshipped for almost 2000 years. If Thomas had been asked how this could be, he would have been lost for an explanation, but he knew it was so. That was indeed great faith.

Jesus affirmed Thomas and spoke a blessing for all of us who have come to believe in him. "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." I see this blessing especially applicable to the Eucharist. We do not see Christ, but we believe his word: "This is my body." "This is my blood." I truly believe this is one of the biggest challenges to people's faith today. "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." Amen.

Third Sunday of Easter

April 18, 2010

INTRODUCTION: (Acts 5,27-32.40b-41; Rev. 5,11-14; John 21,1-19)

The risen Lord continues to be the focus of all of our Scripture readings today. In the second reading, John, the author of the Book of Revelation, has been trying to describe an ecstatic vision he had of heaven. John described God seated on his heavenly throne with 24 elders and four living creatures and countless angels surrounding God's throne. God had in his hand a scroll. The scroll is a central focus of the book for it reveals what is to come. The scroll was sealed shut with seven seals and no one of all those assembled before God's throne could open

the scroll, ... no one except the risen Christ who is described as a lamb that had been killed ... killed but who was victorious over every form of evil: even sin and death. Our second reading today (a short one) is a song from every creature in heaven and earth praising God the Father and the victorious Lamb of God, the risen Lord, who could open up the scroll. It is worth pointing out that the Lamb on the front of our altar is the symbol of the victorious and risen Christ from the Book of Revelation.

Today's first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. After the ascension, Jesus continued his healing ministry through the apostles. On one occasion, Peter and John healed a man who was lame and they attributed the healing to the power of the risen Lord Jesus. This led to their arrest for preaching about Jesus and they were given a warning not to speak about Jesus again. A second time they were arrested and were thrown in jail, but an angel set them free. They went right on preaching about Jesus. So they were arrested for the third time and this is where things are when we hear today's first reading. The apostles Peter and John are on trial before the Sanhedrin, which was for the Jews their supreme religious authority made up of 71 members of the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the high priestly families. It seems strange to me that today's passage leaves out a few verses at the end of the reading that tell us that as a punishment for disobeying the authorities, the apostles were scourged before they were set free. What is remarkable is they were joyful in that they suffered for the Lord.

HOMILY: One perfectly beautiful Sunday morning, a priest couldn't resist the urge to go fishing. So he called up the bishop and with a fake raspy voice he told the bishop he was too sick to say the morning Masses, would the bishop send a substitute to say the Masses? Which the bishop did. The priest's first catch was the biggest fish he had ever landed. St. Peter, up in heaven, saw this and said to Jesus, "that priest lied and let down his congregation. How can you reward him like that?" Jesus smiled and said "actually I intend to teach him a lesson. After running out on his responsibilities as he did, is there anyone he can brag to about his big fish?"

I think today's gospel ranks way up there as one of the most affectionate and caring gospels that we know. I can just picture the apostles being out all night working feverishly tossing in their nets and pulling them back into the boat over and over all night and coming in to shore with nothing to show for all their labor. And there is Jesus, watching them come in, almost as if he had been there all night watching over them. He sees their exhaustion and frustration. He greets them as little children (which in this case is a term of affection toward one who is treasured in the way a parent treasures a child). He asks them the normal question people tend to ask fishermen: "Did you have any luck?" Then he filled their net with fish. When they finally got to shore, he had breakfast going for them. This was not just a thoughtful gesture; it expressed the real reason why he came to us - in order to feed us. Today's miracle recalls an earlier miracle, the miracle of the loaves and the fishes which took place beside this same lake, a miracle with a definite connection to the Eucharist. On that earlier occasion when Jesus fed the people miraculously, he made clear to them that he did not come just to deliver free meals for people but to be our food for everlasting life. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever," he told us in John, 6,51.

Then our gospel moves on to Jesus' conversation with Peter, a conversation that lovingly gives Peter the opportunity to undo the three times he denied Jesus after Jesus' arrest. First Jesus asked Peter, "do you love me more than these?" You might recall that at the Last Supper, after Jesus predicted that everyone would desert him, Peter boasted "Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be." (Mt 26, 33) Peter is more humble now as he answers Jesus: "you know that I love you." It is interesting the words Jesus and Peter use for love. In the Greek (the original version of the gospel) Jesus asks the first two times with agápe love (the highest form of love, love that expresses total unselfish devotion); Peter answers with philía love (a friendship, affectionate kind of love but not with the unselfish dedication of agápe love).

Finally the third time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him as a friend (philía), as if to say, "I'll accept whatever love you have to offer, Peter." You might recall that earlier in John's gospel Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd. Notice in today's gospel, Jesus transferred to Peter Jesus' own office as the Good Shepherd. After each time Jesus questioned Peter and Peter answered, Jesus said, "feed my lambs, feed my sheep." Peter's service to Christ's flock must be a loving gift of oneself as all service to God's people should be. Although Peter was distressed that Jesus questioned him for the third time, I am sure Peter felt totally assured of Jesus' forgiveness after this interchange. Peter did serve Jesus and Jesus' flock with agape - totally unselfish love - for he gave his life for Christ and his Church.

May we now continue to praise Christ's victory over sin and death and may we love Christ and one another with a love that expresses unselfish devotion. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 25, 2010

INTRODUCTION (Acts 13,14.43-52; Rev. 7,9.14b-17; John 10,27-30)

The Book of Revelation requires a lot of explanation, which we do not have time for - but at least I want to give some background so today's second reading won't be a total mystery. Last week we heard John, the author of Revelation, describe some of what he saw in his vision of heaven. God had in his hand a scroll on which was written what was to take place in the future, but the scroll was sealed with seven seals. Only the Lamb of God, that is the Risen Jesus, was able to open the seals. That was last week's reading. John went on to tell us that as the seals were opened, war and terror revealed themselves. The Book of Revelation does not relish this kind of horror; it was only telling what was to happen, and indeed it keeps on happening. The intent of Revelation is to offer hope to those who suffer, especially those who suffer for being faithful to Christ. This is where today's reading takes us. One of the 24 elders standing before God's throne interprets more of John's vision of heaven. John sees God's holy people surrounding God's throne and praising him. They are dressed in white symbolizing their inner holiness and they are holding palm branches as a symbol of their sharing in Christ's victory over sin and death. Their sufferings are over, God will protect them, and the Lamb of God will shepherd them

and provide for all their needs.

Our first reading takes us to Antioch in Pisidia, a small city in what is today the central part of Turkey. Paul is on his first missionary journey accompanied by his companion Barnabas. Jewish communities were scattered all throughout the Roman Empire. Paul made two visits to the local Jewish synagogue there. His first visit was so successful that when he returned the following week he filled the house. But his second visit wasn't nearly so successful as we will now hear.

HOMILY

Archbishop Dolan, the current Archbishop of New York, tells this story. When he was a seminarian in Rome, one day he saw Bishop Sheen coming from an audience with Pope Paul VI. A crowd gathered around Bishop Sheen and asked him what the Holy Father said to him. Bishop Sheen blushed a little and said: "The Holy Father told me: 'Fulton Sheen, you will have a high place in heaven.'" Someone else asked how Bishop Sheen replied to the pope. The witty Bishop Sheen said: "Your Holiness, would you mind making that into an infallible statement?" (from Preaching Resources, April 25, 2010, published by Celebration Publications, Kansas City, Mo.)

I guess we all would like insurance that we're going to get into heaven, but if we did, I wonder if we would keep trying very hard to get there. At least we have the assurance that if we faithfully follow our Good Shepherd, we don't have to worry about it. Jesus tells us in today's gospel: "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand."

Good Shepherd Sunday always reminds me of a person I counseled many years ago. She was very anxious and depressed and this image of the Good Shepherd was her favorite image of Jesus. It always helped her to feel safe and secure when she thought of the Good Shepherd. Each one of us is important to him. The Good Shepherd said he would lay down his life for his sheep, and he has; he has also overcome death and through grace we share in his victory. That is the image given to us in the second reading of a great crowd, beyond anyone's ability to count, being led by the Lamb to springs of life-giving water. The last line in that reading is very touching: "God (like a loving parent) will wipe every tear from their eyes."

I would like to make a brief reference to the sacrament of Confirmation. Today Archbishop Pilarczyk will be here to confirm eight of our children. The past two times we had confirmation the Archbishop allowed me to do them, because I am the dean of the Cathedral Deanery. This time, however, he said, "You should have a bishop come there sometimes." He probably wants to see if we're taking good care of St. Boniface. Confirmation is probably the least understood of the seven sacraments and that's why I wanted to say a few words about it. We learned from our catechism that Baptism and Confirmation mark us with an invisible but indelible seal as belonging to God. The significant difference between Baptism and Confirmation is that in Baptism we become God's child, we are reborn, we receive God's grace for the first time but we are spiritually like infants. When we are Confirmed, we are strengthened in that grace and we are called to live our life in Christ in a more mature way. The analogy I am making is between

birth and adulthood. When we are babies we are on the receiving end of life, we need to be cared for and nurtured. When we are adults we reach out of ourselves, we give life to others both biologically through having children and emotionally through our care and concern for others. So Confirmation calls us to reach out of ourselves, to bring God's life to others through our prayers for them and through sharing our faith and our love with them. The Holy Spirit is given to us in a special way enabling us to do that. Of course, a great deal more could be said about Confirmation and about the Holy Spirit that is given to us, but what I have said might just be enough to remind all of us what we have been called to be when we received Confirmation. Perhaps this might move us in our prayers to pray for those who are being confirmed today. We pray they, and we, follow our Good Shepherd faithfully. Through the way we live our lives, may we witness to our love for God and thus help others to know him and to love him. Amen.