

## Fifth Sunday of Easter- B Cycle

May 6, 2012

**INTRODUCTION** [Acts 9, 26-31; I John 3, 18-24; John 15, 1-8] During the Easter season, our first reading is always from the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of the Apostles tells us how the Risen Christ, through the Holy Spirit, continued to be with his Church and guide his Church and how the Church spread so rapidly. Today's reading begins to tell us about one of those most responsible for the spread of the gospel: St. Paul. Many of the Jews, because they were under Roman occupation, had two names - a Roman name and a Jewish name. Paul's Roman name was Paul and his Jewish name was 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. He was most likely one of the leaders of the crowd who killed Stephen, the first martyr. On one occasion, as he was on his way to Damascus to search out Christians and arrest them, Jesus appeared to him. In an instant Paul realized Christians had it right and he was 100 percent wrong. His life turned around completely and he began preaching and teaching about Jesus, that he was Savior and Messiah. Even after Paul preached about Jesus for three years, the Christian community in Jerusalem was not convinced that he could be trusted. When he first showed up in Jerusalem, the disciples were afraid of him. Barnabas was a disciple the Jerusalem community did trust and he testified that Paul was genuine. Thus, through Barnabas, Paul was welcomed into the community. However, the Hellenists, a term used to describe Greek speaking Jews, refused to accept Paul and saw him as a traitor to Judaism. For his own safety, Paul had to leave Jerusalem. He headed back to his hometown of Tarsus in modern day Turkey.

**HOMILY:** Forgive me for this old story. One day the Holy Father decided to visit the sick in a nursing home. He came to the room of one old man who showed no excitement or even any recognition that this was the Holy Father coming to see him. So the Holy Father asked him, "Do you know who I am?" The old man said, "No, but if you ask the nurse at the desk, she will tell you."

Jesus tried to tell us in so many ways who he was. Especially in St. John's gospel, Jesus often uses the words "I am." Sometimes he uses "I am" without a predicate such as when he said "Amen, Amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I am." (Jn. 8, 58) Other times Jesus used images to describe himself such as: "I am the light of the world," (Jn. 9, 5) or "I am the resurrection and the life," (Jn. 11 25) or "I am the good shepherd," (Jn. 10,11) or "I am the bread of life," (Jn. 6, 35) or as we hear today: "I am the vine, you are the branches," (Jn. 15, 5).

As I was reflecting on today's gospel, two of these "I am" statements came together in an image that impressed itself on me: "I am the bread of life," and "I am the vine, you are the branches." They came together in this image: picture a grape vine coming from the altar during Mass. It extends itself down the center aisle of church at the same time branching out down the side aisles. It continues to branch out all the way to the back of church to encircle and embrace each person who is here. The divine life and love that is alive in that vine brings divine life and love to

each person here. Wherever you are sitting, it reaches out to all. Making each of us part of this vine is a wonderful gift God gives us.

Notice, a vine is not just the stem but the vine is the stem and all the leaves and all the branches and all the fruit. The vine is everything that is alive and growing. Jesus is the vine, and through grace and the Eucharist, we become part of him, and he becomes part of us. We can't live without him any more than a branch that is broken away from its source of life can live on its own. United with him, we live; we live a life we are often not aware of - just like an unborn infant is probably not aware of the life that it is beginning to live. But that life is there. John tells us in his first letter: "beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." (I Jn. 3, 2) Jesus extends his life and his love to us, which we first received in baptism and which he continues to feed in us through the bread of life.

It is comforting to picture Jesus' life and love reaching out to each of us, but Jesus also reminds us we can't just put it in a box and store it away in a cupboard. It is meant to be dynamic. His life and love are meant to be lived in a life of holiness, a life that flows from his teachings, (not simply What Would Jesus Do, because we can't presume to know what he would do, but what did Jesus teach us we should do). It should be a life of not just thinking of ourselves all the time. Certainly we have to take care of ourselves because if we don't know one else will, but our lives must include consideration for others. Quite simply, this is the fruit God looks for: good works. There's a lot to think about in this one little "I am" statement: "I am the vine, you are the branches." We thank him for that; we pray we will live up to the responsibility it lays on us; and we have the Eucharist to strengthen us and help us. Amen.

## **Sixth Sunday of Easter- B Cycle**

**May 13, 2012**

**INTRODUCTION:** As the message of Jesus started to spread, a major issue arose in the early Church. Jesus was a Jew, the Apostles were Jews, and Jesus' first followers were Jews. Jesus had taught people to worship, to love the God of the Jews, and to follow the commandments God gave the Jews. What should Gentiles, who were pagans, do when they became believers and followers of Jesus? Many Jews insisted they should first convert to Judaism before they could accept Jesus as their Savior. They insisted men had to be circumcised and all must follow Jewish dietary laws, Jewish feasts, offer sacrifices in the Temple as prescribed in the Torah. This is the issue that is behind today's first reading. (Acts 10, 25-26,34-35,44-48)

St. Peter, the leader of the community of those who believed in Jesus, received the answer to this question in a very 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 any food that the Law called unclean. God said to him: "What God has made clean, you are not to call unclean." God said this three times to Peter. Then 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 Peter did. Cornelius had a gathering of many relatives and friends (all pagan) at his home waiting for Peter. Cornelius told Peter about an angel who had appeared to him and had told him to send for Peter. So Peter spoke to the group about Jesus. Almost Peter's entire speech has been left out of our reading, but you can look it up in your Bibles when you get home. Today's liturgy wants to focus on the response of the pagan Gentiles, how the Holy Spirit came upon them and how Peter baptized them without insisting that they first convert to Judaism before accepting Jesus into their lives.

**HOMILY:** 2nd Reading: I Jn: 4,7-10; Gospel: Jn 15,9-17 Probably most of you saw the Sunday comics last week. There was one especially appropriate for today. In Baby Blues the mother was having a nice relaxing bath when two of her children came banging on the bathroom door screaming, "Mom, Mom." Mom calls, "What?" The kids answer, "we need you." "What's wrong? Is it serious" Mom asks. The kids holler, "Come quick." Mom, with soapy hair and all wet, throws a towel around herself and rushes out of the bathroom, jumping over the toys and clothes and other items tossed around the room, shouting, "I'm coming, I'm coming." By now the kids are in the living room looking out the window, shouting "Hurry, hurry." Mom makes it to the living room panting, "I'm here - what is it - a fire, accident, injury?" They answer, "Ice Cream truck. Thanks to you we missed it. What took you so long?" Happy Mother's Day! If the mom treated her children with patience and kindness rather than killing them, which she might have felt like doing, she was following the description of love we find in St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "love is patient, love is kind, etc." a passage we often hear at weddings.

Today's gospel on love is a perfect gospel for Mother's Day. Surely most of us first learned about love from our parents, but if you grew up in a home like I did, where mother was always there for her children, it was from our mothers that we experienced love all day long.

Love, as we all know, is not just warm fuzzy feelings; it is dedication and commitment; it is care; it is unselfishness and thoughtfulness; it is patience and kindness; it is forgiveness. Warm fuzzy feelings come and go, and that's why Jesus said love is a commandment. We don't always feel like being loving - whether toward God or toward one another. Thus we spend time in prayer at times when we don't feel like praying. Prayer is a way we show our faith and our love for God. We do a favor for someone who needs our help simply because they need our help and it's the loving thing to do. Jesus said to love our neighbor as ourselves, so love presupposes we love ourselves - not in a selfish way but in a healthy way. If we don't love ourselves, how are we going to love our neighbor? In today's gospel, however, Jesus even ups the ante when he says, "love one another as I love you." We can't love like him - in such an unselfish way - without his help, which we all need every day.

Jesus will give us that help if we ask. There are two lines in today's gospel that always impress me. The one line spoke clearly to me when I was a young priest. I was working hard teaching, counseling, visiting the sick and so on, but I was not praying nearly enough. Once when I was praying, I heard our Lord say to me: "I no longer call you slaves...I have called you friends." I realized Jesus wanted not only my ministry, but he wanted me to spend a little more quiet time alone with him, talking to him and listening to him. He wants a relationship that is one of friendship and friendship doesn't happen without spending time with our friend .

The other part of the gospel that always speaks to me is Jesus' statement: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy might be complete." We all want to be joyful. None of us likes being depressed or miserable. Well, here's one of the ways to joy, love - love of God and love for one another. If you want to be more joyful, pray to be more loving. Amen.

### **Feast of the Ascension - B Cycle**

**May 20, 2012**

Jesus promised that those who believe in him would be able to perform many powerful signs: healing the sick, casting out demons, praying in tongues, being bit by serpents without any ill effect and a few others. Probably all of these signs reflect the miraculous powers given to the Apostles in the early Church, including once when St. Paul was bitten by a viper on the Island of Melita (Acts 28, 3) and nothing happened to him. That event brought a lot of conversions. The Church to this day still has a sacrament for the sick, still does exorcisms, and some believers pray in tongues. All of the people I know still avoid snakes.

I want to tell you a story. A man who was not a frequent church goer decided to go to church with his wife one Sunday. She went to a very fundamentalist denomination that took every word in the Bible literally. During the service this gospel was read and after the reading the pastor walked down the main aisle of church, picked up a large box, opened it up and it was filled with all kinds of snakes. He started handing them out to people as he walked up the aisle, asking them to prove their faith. The husband asked his wife, "you don't think he's going to hand me one of those, do you." "I don't know," she said. "Well," he said, looking around the room, "where's the back door?" "There ain't none," she replied. "Well then," the husband asked, "where do you think they would like to have one?" The Joyful Noiseletter, April 2009

I don't think Jesus expects us to go around testing God by deliberately getting bit by serpents. Jesus expects us to use our good sense. He himself told Satan, "you shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test" when Satan was tempting Jesus to throw himself off the parapet of the Temple.

Our first reading is the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles. It is St. Luke's second volume showing how the work of Jesus continued after his ascension. As he begins the book of Acts,

Luke briefly gives us a recapitulation of what he has already told us in his gospel about Jesus' work, his death and his resurrection. We heard Luke tell us in today's first reading that for 40 days Jesus continued to appear to the Apostles and teach them about the kingdom. There is no other mention of 40 days in the Acts of the Apostles, other than the period of time during which Jesus appeared to the Apostles. When we read this passage, it sounds as if Jesus didn't ascend to the Father until after he finished appearing. But Luke tells us in his gospel it was on Easter Sunday night when Jesus ascended. I think he first ascended than started appearing to the Apostles for a period of time until he thought they were sufficiently prepared to do the work he wanted them to do.

The number 40 is a round number meaning something like between 25 and 45. It is a number that is often used symbolically as a time of preparation. Remember God's chosen people spent 40 years in the desert in preparation to enter the promised land, Elijah walked 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Horeb as he prepared for the next part of his calling, Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the desert before he began his public ministry. Jesus' appearances after the resurrection for 40 days, as presented here in Luke, suggests that Jesus was teaching and preparing his Apostles to go out and continue his work.

Of all the things Jesus and his Apostles may have talked about, Luke draws special attention to a burning issue in the early Church. The Apostles ask Jesus, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They were all thinking apocalyptically; that is, they were looking forward to the time when God would punish their enemies, raise the dead to life and establish his kingdom of peace and justice when the Messiah would rule the world. We see this was a real issue in the early Church in some of the letters of St. Paul. After 2000 years it still hasn't happened. Through the centuries many people have predicted when this would take place. Jesus never gave an answer to that question, and those who have tried to figure it out have always failed. So when people try to predict the end of the world and the second coming of Christ, the odds say they will be wrong. We seldom think much about it but our Lord tells us that we should be concerned so that we are prepared and when the Lord comes he will find us living the way God wants us to.

I have been talking about the first reading from Luke, but before I conclude I should say something about the gospel from Mark. Mark ends his brief description of Jesus' ascension by telling us Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Father. In effect, Mark is saying that Jesus was at the same level of power and importance as God, above every principality, authority, power, and dominion and every thing that ever existed or will exist as Paul tells us in the second reading. Being seated at God's right hand is one of the earliest ways of expressing Jesus' glorification. Later the Church gave a clearer description of Jesus' position vis-a-vis the Father. In the Council of Nicea, the Church officially defined that Jesus is equal to and of the divine being with the Father. The Council used the word "consubstantial" with the Father, a word that means "of the same substance." We say this in the Creed each week.

In contrast to Mark, Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, ends his description of the ascension using a somewhat different image. Jesus is hidden from view by a cloud or even raised up by a

cloud. In other words, Jesus entered into a world that is beyond what we can know about while we are still in this present life. As Paul said, "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into people's hearts what God has prepared for those who love him." The great theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, who clearly and beautifully wrote volumes about God and the life of faith, had a mystical experience while saying Mass. He somehow saw beyond that cloud and experienced the glory of God. After that he stopped writing. People asked why and he said something like: "what I have seen makes all my writing look like straw in comparison." Besides representing the glory of heaven which cannot be seen, a cloud in the Bible is also a symbol of divinity. Remember it was a cloud that led the people of God through the desert as they traveled to the Promised Land. It was a cloud that filled Solomon's Temple when God made it his dwelling place. Through different images, Luke and Mark are telling us that Jesus entered into the fullness of glory that was rightfully his. The Ascension, however, is not just about the glorification of Jesus; it is also a feast of hope for us, for where Christ has gone, he has promised that we who live as he has taught us will certainly follow. It is one of the few guarantees that we can have in this life. Amen.

## **Pentecost - B Cycle**

**May 27, 2012**

**INTRODUCTION:** Our first reading is from the prophet Joel, one of the 12 minor prophets. About the only time we hear from this prophet is on Ash Wednesday. Joel lived during a great plague of locusts who would likely have destroyed all the crops the people depended on for food and there would have been a terrible famine. He called all God's people to a time of serious prayer and fasting. (That's why he is read on Ash Wednesday.) Today's first reading was probably a pronouncement by the prophet after the locusts were gone. Joel sees God at work in rescuing his people from famine and from the plague. As such, God's spirit brings life and salvation for those who call on the name of the Lord. St. Peter uses this passage almost in its entirety to explain that the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' disciples at Pentecost is the fulfillment of the words of the prophet.

**INTRODUCTION:** We hear in our first reading St. Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles of the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The Spirit came with a loud noise, tongues of fire, and the gift of the apostles being able to speak new languages. The coming of the Holy Spirit took place in the presence of Jews from all over the world. However, the greatest sign of God's Spirit at work was the courage shown in the apostles, especially Peter who just weeks before denied three times that he even knew Christ.

**HOMILY:** Pentecost is one of the oldest and one of the three most important feasts of the Jewish people. That's why there were so many people in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus' disciples. It is believed to have originally been an agricultural feast. Somewhere in the course of time it began to be celebrated as the anniversary of the giving of the law to

Moses on Mt. Sinai. It is because of the coming of the Holy Spirit that Pentecost has also become one of the three most important feasts in our liturgical calendar. I always ask people to wear something red to remind all of us that this is a special day.

Through the outpouring of the Spirit the Church, under the leadership of Peter and the Apostles, received the power and the commission to speak to all nations and to be understood by them. Through the gift of the Spirit, Jesus continues his work of bringing God's life and love to all of us. Almost every book in the New Testament speaks to us about the action of the Spirit guiding the Church and guiding each of us closer to God.

Paul especially tells us the Spirit helps us to believe in Jesus (no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit). The Spirit helps us to pray, even as we are often plagued with distractions. The Spirit helps us live lives of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The Spirit enlightens us to know God's way and to live it. The Spirit calls us to unity with Christ and with one another, something Jesus desires and earnestly prayed for at the Last Supper. St. Paul tells us, "in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..." The Spirit dwells in us as St. Paul tells the Corinthians who thought they could use their bodies any way they chose. He teaches us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. (I Cor. 6,19) Through the Spirit, Christ gives us forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation for Jesus said to the apostles, "whose sins you forgive they are forgiven them." There is no end to what we could say about the Spirit, for the Spirit is infinite for the Spirit is God.

I would like to share with you some of the ways I have experienced the Spirit at work. Sometimes (and it has happened often) I have been reading the Scriptures and a particular verse seems to jump off the page. I feel it deep inside that God is speaking to me personally through that verse. Or when I am counseling or visiting the sick, something brilliant comes out of my mouth and I realize that idea didn't come from me, it was God's Spirit speaking. When I do something to help someone and I get that really good feeling inside, that's the Holy Spirit at work. I'm sure everyone here has experienced that feeling. Of course, the Spirit is at work in my ministry as a priest, saying Mass, consecrating the bread and wine, forgiving sin, anointing the sick.

We call God's Spirit the Holy Spirit for there are other spirits that are not holy. I believe there are evil spirits; I believe there is a spirit in our world today that does not mirror the Holy Spirit, but is rather a spirit of making up one's own rules in life, independent of what God wants of us. If a person wants to identify themselves as a "spiritual person," they should ask themselves what spirit it is that is directing their lives. If they desire everlasting life and happiness, it is only by the Holy Spirit that they will achieve it.

There is one line in the Scriptures that I love. Jesus said, "if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Lk. 11,13) Do not hesitate to ask for the Holy Spirit. God will not deny you your request.