

Fifth Sunday of Lent – C Cycle
March 17, 2013

INTRODUCTION – *Isaiah 43, 6-21; Philippians 3, 8-14; John 8, 1-11* God's people were a captive people, enslaved by the Babylonians 600 years before Christ. After 50 years of captivity, God sent them a prophet to announce to them that they were about to be set free. We hear that prophet in today's first reading. God tells them their release from the Babylonians would be no less spectacular than their release from slavery in Egypt centuries earlier. Even as the prophet speaks, he tells them the road back to their own land is being made ready. God's statement, "see, I am doing something new," leads us into the gospel. There we hear about a woman caught in adultery who was about to be sentenced to death. Jesus is doing something new: offering forgiveness rather than condemnation.

HOMILY – One afternoon the parish priest was getting ready to hear confessions. As he entered the confessional room, which had a divider in it, he found a man already in the room waiting for him. The man told the parish priest, "It's been 45 years since I've been to confession. I am impressed how things have changed. The room is well lit, it's a nice easy chair to sit in, a bottle of scotch, some nice cigars. It wasn't that way the last time I went." The parish priest said, "yes, it is rather comfortable, but where you are sitting is my side of the confessional room." By the way, if anyone wants to check out our confessional, they are welcome to. It's pretty simple.

I thought I might say something about confession today. The sacrament referred to as "confession" is also called the sacrament of penance or reconciliation. I thought the topic might be appropriate because of today's gospel where Jesus, as he had done many times in the gospels, demonstrates God's merciful love.

He did not come to condemn but to save. In the old days, which many of us remember, the priest often thought his job was to scold the penitent. Many people never came back because of that. I always tell our people in the RCIA, if a priest starts to bawl you out, get up and leave. Go to someone else who sees their role as that of Christ who offers freedom from guilt and shame and a sense of God's peace. Fortunately, I was blest with that kind of a confessor almost all my life. I've always felt that scolding doesn't help them to grow spiritually, but offering a person the chance to start over and the opportunity to know God's love does help a person to grow. Imagine how this woman in the gospel was changed by her encounter with Christ.

Jesus came not to condemn but to save. That's the purpose of confession or reconciliation. Sometimes the priest tries to guide a person to see how wrong their behavior might be, but that guidance should be done in a gentle and loving way. The only time I know that Jesus was ever harsh with anyone was with the religious leaders who thought they were perfect and refused to see their faults. We're all sinners. We are all in need of God's mercy and love. That's why Christ came to us. You'll notice when the chips were down and Jesus started writing on the ground, no one threw any stones. They knew he had called their bluff. Some people have speculated that Jesus

was writing people's sins, but no one knows for sure. Anyway, we're all in the same boat with the crowd in the gospel, we would all have to walk away if Jesus said, "let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone at her." Jesus does not whitewash sin or ignore the seriousness of it. More than anyone he knows how it hurts us and hurts our relationship with God. Notice he told the woman, "go and from now on, do not sin any more." The old catechism called this "a firm purpose of amendment."

In the first five or six centuries of the Church, people were allowed to receive confession only once in their lifetime. It was only for publicly committed serious sins. The attitude of Church leaders was that if a person sinned again, there was no hope for them. In addition, people had to go through a period of public penance *before* reconciliation. Around the sixth or seventh century, mostly due to the influence of the monasteries, a practice developed where the sacrament began to be used as spiritual direction. People went, even though they had no grave sins, and they went more frequently. It is the practice we have today, although many more people took advantage of the sacrament two or three generations ago than they do now. I think a person should go as often as they find it helpful, at least once or twice a year just to help themselves grow spiritually.

The sacrament of reconciliation is one of the most rewarding parts of being a priest, especially when I know I have helped lift a burden of guilt and self-hatred off a person's conscience. I am blest to be able to participate in the process of bringing God's love and peace to someone. I might mention that we have our penance service this Wednesday. There is an insert in today's bulletin describing how to make a good confession. Amen.

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord – C Cycle March 24, 2013

I first want to say thank you for your prayers and good wishes for my operation. It's been four weeks since my knee was replaced and I am being told it is progressing quite well; however, I sure am tired. I am trying to conserve as much energy as possible because it's going to be a busy week. So I hope you will forgive me for being brief today.

When I was a child in grade school I often suffered with asthma, and I found that meditation on the sufferings of Jesus was a tremendous source of comfort and strength for me. If what I have to say this afternoon does not offer much to inspire you, there is a great deal of scripture we've just heard that might offer some other ideas for your reflection. The main part of today's gospel that strikes me is the question that comes up in the central part of Jesus' trial. Who is this Jesus who suffered, died and rose from the dead? He entered Jerusalem with exciting shouts from a crowd of followers: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." He was arrested for the same reason for which he was praised: that he was the Christ, the messiah, the Jewish savior and king. When he was accused of being a king, he could have said he wasn't who they said he was – and the trial would have been over. He would have been set free,

for there was little else they could accuse him of. But when asked if he were the Messiah, the Christ, he would not deny that that's who he was: "you say that I am!" he answered the chief priests and the governor, Pontius Pilate.

His ambiguous answer as to who he was seems to challenge us: do we just call him our king; do we come to him crying "hosanna" which means "save us" when we want something. Would we be hesitant to stand up for him as our king in spite of a noisy crowd who call for his crucifixion. Who is this Jesus we honor today? It is faith in the resurrection that ultimately gives us the answer to this question.

Holy Thursday March 28, 2013

A little five year-old child and his mother were on their way to McDonald's one evening, and on the way they passed a car accident. The mother and her son would usually say a prayer for whoever might be hurt whenever they passed by an accident or saw an ambulance. The mother pointed the accident out to her son and said we should say a prayer. So her son fervently offered his prayer: "dear God, please don't let those cars block the entrance to McDonald's." *Reader's Digest, Laughter the Best Medicine, pg 89.*

Eating, it's an important priority in most people's lives, isn't it? We don't like anything to get in the way when we're ready to eat. For almost all of us, eating has become more than just a way to stay alive. It is often a way to celebrate, a way to enjoy good friends, a way to remember important occasions such as a birthday, an anniversary, a holy day or holiday. God made the eating of a special meal a way for the Jews to remember that he led them to freedom, made them his chosen people and expected them to live lives of holiness as his chosen people. Without special ways to remember, we can easily forget and so in our first reading we hear the story of how the Passover came about.

It was this celebration of remembrance of having been chosen by God as his special people that Jesus and his disciples were commemorating at the Last Supper. At the supper Jesus surprised his apostles by revealing a new way in which God was about to extend his saving love to all people. With bread he gave them to eat he said: "this is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And with a cup of wine he gave them to share he said: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it in remembrance of me." What a shock that must have been to their sensibilities – those who grew up having to drain every drop of blood out of the food they ate, now being told to take this cup of Jesus' blood and drink it, and through it they would have entered into a covenant, a commitment of love with him. Our second reading, which describes this event, is a very important one because it is the earliest description of the Eucharist that we have, written 15 years before the first gospel was written.

This is one of the most difficult parts of our faith for many people today. In the scientific culture in which we live, we look for proof and evidence. We have an attitude of “seeing is believing;” the gospels see things the other way: “believing is seeing.” Until we believe, we will not see this mystery. That’s basically what Jesus told Peter: “unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.” Before Jesus can fill us with his love, we must surrender ourselves to him in faith.

In our gospel we see there is one more thing Jesus asks of us, he asks for our faith and he also asks for our love, our love for him and for one another. I have washed your feet; you ought to wash one another’s feet. “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.” He who came to serve and not to be served asks us to serve one another in love.

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us a lesson on food that applies to the Eucharist and pulls all these ideas together. I will end with this. Thomas says when we eat something, it is turned into who we are. That bowl of spaghetti we had for supper last evening has now become our human flesh and muscle, brain and bone. It has become us. When we receive Christ in the Eucharist, however, we do not turn him into ourselves, but we become him; we are raised up to share in his nature, to be more like him. The more we are fed on him, the more we become like him. Amen.

Deacon Jerry preached on Good Friday.

Easter
March 31, 2013

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.’”

Jesus didn’t quite phrase it that way, but he did say “in a little while you will not see me, and then a little while later you will see me.” He also said, “it is because I am going to the Father.” (Jn 16,16) Even though by now Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection three times, the Apostles had no idea what Jesus was talking about - it took the full experience of seeing Jesus arrested, condemned, crucified, and buried, and then to find the tomb empty three days later, as well as having him personally appear to them, eat with them and show them his wounds. St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians and the various gospels tell us of a number of appearances that took place before the apostles fully started to believe.

But once they did, and once the Holy Spirit came down on them, they were a force that could not be stopped in spreading the “good news” that Jesus had risen.

They had seen Jesus raise dead people back to life, namely, the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow of Naim and Jesus' friend Lazarus who lived in Bethany. But those were temporary resurrections; those people would die again. Jesus' resurrection was totally different; he could not die again, his human body was filled with divine life, which is eternal life. His body took on the properties of a spirit, yet it was not a spirit, it was real flesh and blood.

Jesus' resurrection was the beginning of something totally new and different. It is a mystery that opens up to us eternal life. He came not just to die and rise for his own benefit, but for us, that we too might live with him forever. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life and may have it to the full." (Jn 10,10)

Today's feast is the most important feast in the whole year. If Jesus had not risen, we would never have heard of him. The apostles would never have preached about him nor would they have given their lives for what they preached. Through the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' kingdom began to grow and it continues to grow in spite of 2000 years when there was always someone who was trying to destroy it. Tonight we gather in his memory, tonight we hear again the story of his victory over death, tonight we receive the sacraments that keep us united with him and growing in his life and his love.

Tonight we give praise for all that God has done for us in Jesus and tonight I wish all of you a blessed Easter. I pray that the light of the Easter fire might burn in your hearts throughout the rest of the year. Amen.