

Second Sunday of Easter - C Cycle
April 7, 2013

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

A new power has revealed itself in our world through the resurrection of Jesus. It is a creative power, a power that offers eternal life and peace and joy and love, a power that is not aimed at the destruction of anything, except for the destruction of sin. We see that power at work in its various forms today. In today's gospel we see that power at work on Easter Sunday night in that death could not destroy Jesus, but his resurrection was the beginning of eternal life for him and for all who followed him. Jesus shared with his followers the same Holy Spirit that filled him and he gave them the gift to be able to forgive sins by his power.

Our first reading shows how the Church grows rapidly from the beginning due to the preaching of the apostles and the gifts of healing given to the early church. When we hear our second reading, we realize this was a time many years later. The Church was going through a time of serious persecution. God assured his people he would not leave them. "Do not be afraid," he told them. He begins to reveal what the future holds for God's people, difficult times, but victory when it's all over.

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 that's what the Apostle Thomas was asking himself all week after the other apostles had told him they had seen the Lord. It must have been dreadful wondering if Jesus would appear again and if so when. It happens, not by accident, that Jesus appears the following Sunday; I say not by accident, because Sunday would replace the Sabbath and would become the day on which Christ's followers would meet together to hear the teachings of the apostles about Jesus.

My early days as a priest proved to be very difficult times. It was right after the second Vatican Council, and there was a lot of stress that came along with the changes of Vatican II. Going out into a career of being a street cleaner was much more appealing sometimes than teaching school and adjusting to new ways of doing things. I didn't have any problem with the changes of Vatican II but some of the pastors I lived with sure didn't like them and they didn't particularly like anyone who promoted them. I prayed for peace inside myself. One day I heard this gospel where Jesus said to his apostles: "Peace be with you." I had heard it many times before, but on that particular occasion it sounded as if Jesus was speaking to me personally: "Peace be with **you!**" I thought, "well, why shouldn't peace be with me. It's something Jesus wants for me and it's something I wanted for myself" so when I prayed for peace, I knew it had to come. It did, slowly but definitely. When you pray for something you know Jesus wants and you want too, how can it not happen?

There are a lot of things in today's gospel that will lead us to peace: the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the forgiveness of sins, the gathering in prayer on the Lord's day and hearing his word, the act of faith we make in Jesus, even if we have not seen him with our eyes. Even in the midst of later persecutions, which the Church had to face, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid."

How can a person not have peace if peace is something we want for ourselves and it is something Jesus wants for us (and it is something only he can give)? Peace be with you. Amen.

Third Sunday of Easter - C Cycle April 14, 2013

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. I would like to comment on our second reading first, the Book of Revelation. John, the author of the book, had just attempted to describe his ecstatic vision of God in heaven. In the vision God had in his hand a scroll. The scroll is a central focus of the book of Revelations for the scroll revealed the events that were to occur in the future. However, the scroll was sealed with seven seals and only the risen Christ was capable of breaking open the seals so the scroll could be read. The risen Christ is described as a lamb that had been killed ... killed but who was victorious over sin and death and every form of evil. In this very short passage, every creature in heaven and earth is 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. It is shortly after the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. The apostles Peter and John are on trial before the supreme Jewish religious body, the Sanhedrin, because they were preaching and healing in the name of Jesus. They had already received one warning to stop talking about Jesus. Freedom of speech was not part of their constitution. The trial is very interesting and has been summarized quite a bit. I think the most important part of the story is the joy the apostles experienced because they could suffer for the sake of Christ.

HOMILY: Just about every time we hear the Scriptures on Sunday, we have to adjust our mind to a different timeframe with each reading. Today is no exception. Our gospel takes place just a few weeks after the resurrection of our Lord. We are told it was only the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples. From that appearance of Jesus to the trial of the apostles narrated in our first reading, just a few weeks had passed by, but a lot of things occurred, especially the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. As a result they were supercharged with divine power and enthusiasm and they didn't waste any time going everywhere to preach about Jesus and to heal people in his name. That's how they got into trouble with the Jewish leaders and got themselves arrested.

When we get to our second reading from Revelation we come to a time when the Church had grown considerably and was being persecuted. It was during this time that the Book of Revelation was written, which could have been from 64 AD when Nero started his persecutions until the end of the century.

One of the main characters who stands out in today's readings is St. Peter. We remember how Peter denied Jesus when Jesus was arrested and persecuted. In today's gospel, just a few weeks after the resurrection, Jesus gave Peter a chance to undo his cowardly denial when he asked Peter three times "Do you love me?"

We see three significant moments in Peter's life in today's readings: when Peter denied Jesus, when Peter professed his love for Jesus and when, through the power of the Spirit, Peter lost all fear and boldly spoke up before the 71 Jewish leaders in the Sanhedrin that: "We must obey God rather than men." God's grace continued to work powerfully in Peter even to his laying down his life for his Lord during the reign of Nero in 64 AD.

I want to digress for a moment right now and discuss a little theology about Peter and his position as head of the Church, so please try not to lose me. Perhaps 40 or 50 years after Peter had been martyred, John wrote his gospel. Why do you suppose John would have remembered this conversation between Jesus and Peter and would have made it a part of his gospel? Was it just because it was a nice story? It was, of course, because it showed Jesus' merciful forgiveness, but it also shows something else. Each time Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" Jesus followed it up with a mission: "feed my lambs; feed my sheep." Why make an issue of this special mission given to Peter after he had long been dead? The most obvious reason I see is that it was not a personal prerogative of Peter to be shepherd of God's people, but it emphasized a position of responsibility that Jesus was giving to Peter that was meant to endure. Peter's successors (Linus, and Anacletus and Clement I all the way to our present Pope Francis) would continue serving in the ministry that Jesus gave to Peter, to feed Christ's people.

One last idea I want to leave with you is Jesus' question to Peter, "do you love me?" This is the same question he regularly asks us. He knows we are imperfect; he knows we fail him in times of weakness, pride, greed, etc. What he wants to know is that we sincerely love him and when we do then he forgives all our failings. He does, however, ask us to share in his work of growing God's kingdom. Last Sunday is often called Divine Mercy Sunday. Some people are not very happy with me that I don't make a special homily about Divine Mercy Sunday. My view is that any time we've done wrong, God's mercy is there for us if we repent and we can sincerely say to Jesus as Peter did: "you know all things, you know that I love you." Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Easter - C Cycle
April 21, 2013

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 it had been written what was to take place in the future. 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 came about on the earth. The Book of Revelation does not delight in horror; it was simply warning God's people what they were to prepare for and 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 one of John's visions 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.

In our first reading we join St. Paul on his first missionary journey. We are in Antioch in Pisidia, a small city in what is today the central part of Turkey. Along with Paul is 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

It has been a tumultuous week, bombings in Boston, an explosion in a fertilizer plant in West Texas, letters to congressmen carrying poisonous powder, not to mention the ongoing problems in the Middle East and North Korea. When we experience things like we did this week, we wonder, where is God in all this? This question has been asked since the beginning of human history. Primitive people often felt that when bad things happened, the gods were angry with them and were punishing them for their evil ways or for their failure to honor the gods. Modern people often tend to deny that there is a God, that no God would allow these things to happen.

2500 years ago the Jewish people came up with their explanation of why evil happens. They told the story of when God created all things he saw that it was very good. God put his human creatures in a garden of paradise where they would find perfect happiness. They did have to obey one law God gave them. They chose not to obey, and their pride led them to lose the happiness God had intended for them. Even at that very time that they lost what happiness God intended for them, God promised his first human creatures that there would be redemption. God would send a person who would destroy the power of evil and crush its head.

In the fullness of time, God did send a redeemer, a redeemer who calls us to hear his voice: “my sheep hear my voice,” he tells us. If we follow him he promises us eternal life and that we will never perish. The image of the Good Shepherd is an image that Jesus’ listeners would immediately understand.

In a more modern way of thinking, Jesus is telling us that hearing him is where we are to get our values, the standards and principles that guide our lives and affect in a major way our happiness or unhappiness in life. If we don’t let his wisdom guide us, how will we seek to find direction in life, or how will we give our children values and ideals? That is part of the problem with the world today; the values that Christ taught us are being ignored. Like our first parents, we make up our own rules to our own disadvantage because we figure we know better than God what will lead us to fulfillment and happiness. Jesus’ words, however, to us are clear: “my sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.” It would take a lifetime to answer all the problems about evil in the world. I just wanted to leave you with a few things to think about.

The garden of paradise is being offered to us again. We choose it by choosing to follow the way Christ has shown us. That doesn’t mean that along the way the path will be smooth and easy. The garden of paradise is not for this world but for the next. There will always be bumps and disappointments and tears in this world. During those times we have to remember St. Paul’s words: “for those who love God, all things work out for the best.” That’s what has always helped me to remain positive even during the most difficult times.

Today is vocation Sunday. We pray every week for vocations, but on Good Shepherd Sunday we are reminded of the important role religious vocations have in guiding us in the ways of Christ. This is the life I have been living for almost 49 years now and it has been a privilege. I’ve had wonderful times as a priest and difficult times too, but has anyone ever been able to escape difficult times in this life. As I look back over the years, I suspect if I had lived my life in any other way than as a priest, I would not have found the happiness I did. I just wanted to put in a good word for the religious life and I would like to see others come forward with a similar desire to serve him as a priest, deacon (permanent deacon), religious brother or sister. Please keep that in your prayers today. Amen.

Fifth Sunday of Easter - C Cycle
April 28, 2013

INTRODUCTION (*Acts 14, 21-27; Rev. 21, 1-5a; John 13, 31-33a,34-45*) - Last Sunday we heard a little bit about Paul’s first missionary journey. His preaching and miraculous works led many people, both Jews and Pagans, to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. At the

same time there, was a considerable amount of opposition to his teachings. In today's first reading, Paul is on his return trip to Syria. In spite of the harsh treatment he had previously received from his opponents in various towns and cities, he is not afraid to revisit those places. The name "Antioch" is confusing for there were two cities named Antioch. The first was a town in central Turkey where a mob of unbelievers ran Paul out of town. The second Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was a city on the east coast of Syria and it was where Paul's missionary journey began. Paul was returning there to report on the successes and challenges of his mission. On his way back home, he warned his converts that living the gospel is not always easy. He told them: "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

HOMILY - This is a true story. Archbishop Leibold, who was our bishop about 40 years ago, was at a local parish for confirmation. Some of you who are older remember the custom at that time was to confirm children in the third grade. The Archbishop used to ask the children questions before he confirmed them. That this was right after the Vatican Council when a lot of religious education programs had tossed out the catechisms and taught about nothing but love. Well Archbishop Leibold started asking questions somewhat like "what was the name of Jesus' mother?" A hand went up and the child answered. "love." "How many apostles did Jesus have?" Another hand went up and the child answered. "love." This happened two or three more times before the Archbishop decided this question and answer session was going nowhere, so he went back to the altar to continue the service. The children's teacher did a good job emphasizing love, but missed out on teaching them a few other important things.

Now love is the answer to many things, and if that's all we knew and practiced about our faith we would probably be in good standing with God as long as it is the kind of love Jesus is talking about. The only problem with "love" is that it has so many meanings. We can distort it to make it mean almost anything we want. Today Jesus tells us he is giving us a new commandment: to love one another. Hearing this we may wonder what is so new about love. It is the meaning he gives it when he tells us, "As I have loved you, so also you should love one another." "As I have loved you..." are the key words here. Jesus wants us to love as he did. He loved with perfect obedience to the Father and with such total unselfishness that he gave his life totally for us. Who of us could ever live up to that high ideal? His love is out of our league. He loved with a love that was divine. How could we humans ever love with so great a love? We can, but only with his help and only with his presence in our hearts. It takes emptying our hearts of pride, selfishness, greed, lust, envy, laziness, etc. That's a big order and that's why we are here today, to remember Jesus' love for us and to let it inspire us to imitate him. He even told us to do what we are doing in his memory. We are also here to be more closely united with Jesus for he told us without me you can do nothing.

Our second reading today is one of the last chapters of the Book of Revelation. If you have ever challenged yourself to read through it, you will surely remember how it tells of all the natural and supernatural catastrophes that were to take place. But that's not the main point of Revelations. Today's second reading is leading us to the main point. It

describes where our future is headed if we remain faithful to God. Revelations promises a new world where death and suffering will no longer exist, where those who have loved God and loved each other as Jesus commands of us will abide with God in eternal love and joy. Amen.