

## Fourth Sunday of Easter – A Cycle

May 7, 2017

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Acts 2, 14a.36-41; I Peter 2, 20b-25; John 10, 1-10*) The background for our first reading is Pentecost. After the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus' first followers, the disciples left the upper room where they were gathered and started preaching about Jesus. Many of the people who were there for the feast came from foreign lands and were unfamiliar with the language the disciples were speaking, but miraculously they could understand what was being said. Peter stepped forward to explain what was happening. Today's reading is the conclusion of Peter's sermon. He proclaims Jesus is Lord and Christ; i.e., as Lord, Jesus is divine and as Christ, Jesus is the Messiah, the savior of God's people. In the second reading from the first letter of Peter, the saving mission of Jesus is proclaimed, so that we, like lost sheep, could be brought back to God.

**HOMILY:** Today is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. Sheep and shepherds were a major part of the economy and culture of the Middle East in Jesus' time, and they still are. So when Jesus wanted to teach some difficult lesson, he could explain it by using farming and shepherding as an example. Today's example is about the sheep gate. The gate was important in that it kept the sheep from wandering or getting stolen by robbers or getting killed by wolves. In that sense the gate was protective. It also had the function of letting the shepherd take the sheep out to give them a field where they could graze and a stream where they could drink. In this sense, the gate allowed the shepherd to provide for the sheep. Jesus uses this simple example to describe who he was. Jesus' enemies couldn't understand it (or they didn't want to understand it).

Notice that Jesus called himself the gate twice. When he said he was the gate, he was saying he would protect us and care for us and he would provide for us. So let me show how describing Jesus as the door of the sheep pen applies to us. In other words, we all want to get to heaven in the next life and Jesus is the one and only one who makes it possible to get in. Too many people, with their new age theology, act and believe that somehow we all are going to get there. They don't want to accept that there is a door or a gate they need to enter through, and Jesus is the only entry point. If we are to be saved, it is through Jesus. If we are not seeking to be saved through him, we are going to miss out on all the wonderful things God has planned for us.

We all would like to believe there is no such thing as hell. One seldom hears about it even in church. Truth is, I don't enjoy talking about it. I would rather even give a money talk. But it is part of the gospel; it is part of our faith. I have to be fair and talk about everything our faith teaches us. Jesus was certainly very aware of the reality of hell. There are many ways in which Jesus addresses the topic, but none more clearly than the Last Judgment scene where he says: Depart from me you accursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me no drink, etc.

When I preach, I usually don't like to talk about things that are negative and so I stress the blessings that come from serving and loving God and others. That is what we need to keep our mind fixed on. I love that statement of Jesus that ended today's gospel: "I

came that they may have life and may have it abundantly.” Jesus is telling us that he is the source of that abundant life. The prayers and good works we have offered in this life will be greatly rewarded in the next. That is a positive note to end on. Amen.

## **Fifth Sunday of Easter – A Cycle**

**May 14, 2017**

### **INTRODUCTION** – *(Acts 6, 1-7; I Peter 2, 4-9; John 14, 1-12)*

Three weeks ago, we heard St. Luke tell us in the Acts of the Apostles how the early Christians were united in prayer and in sharing their material possessions and in learning from the Apostles. This sense of unity turned into disunity as the community of believers grew. Let me explain what I mean. The very first believers in Jesus were Jews from around Jerusalem who spoke Aramaic. Soon Jews from countries outside the Holy Land came to hear of Jesus and came to believe in him. Since Greek was the common language in the Roman Empire at that time, those who lived outside of the Holy Land spoke Greek. Also they tended to be more partial to Greek customs and ideas than the Jerusalem Jews and for these various reasons, they were called Hellenists. When the Hellenists visited Jerusalem during big feasts, they felt as if they were being treated like second-class citizens - especially when food was being handed out. Remember, in those days widows were entirely dependent on the community for their basic needs (sort of a welfare system). The Hellenists complained that their widows were being overlooked and not getting their fair share. The Apostles felt their role was not to distribute food but to stay focused on prayer and preaching. They solved the problem by creating a new office in the Church, the diaconate, a word that comes from the Greek word for servant: diakonos. I have to add a personal note: I am so grateful the Apostles created the ministry of deacons and that the Second Vatican Council has, after many years, restored the permanent diaconate to an active and important role in Church life. Wherever I've been, I've always had great deacons to help in the ministry of the parish. Since today is Mother's Day, I want to add I've also had wonderful mothers: my biological mother and, after she died when I was in high school, I had a loving stepmother. May you all be blessed for your love and dedication.

**HOMILY** –The Last Supper is the setting for our gospel. In the gospel according to John, we are told that Jesus had just finished washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus, ever the thoughtful person, knows he needs to prepare his apostles for what is ahead for them. It will be horrendous for them when Jesus is arrested, put on trial, tortured and finally dies on a cross. While Jesus is facing such a future, they are preoccupied with which of them was most important and who would get the most important positions in the kingdom of God.

It seems like Jesus is asking the impossible when he says: “do not let your hearts be troubled.” It would be impossible not to be troubled but he knew that their faith would be enough to help them survive most anything. Sometimes when we have to face hard times, it seems as if God is asking too much of us. We have to dig deeply into that faith we have been blessed with, and we will survive. I often wonder how people without faith survive.

Thomas seems to be Jesus' most practical disciple. He doesn't want vague promises of pie in the sky. He wants some concrete answers. Where is Jesus going, how do they get there. Is it a long and difficult road to travel. What direction do they set out on: east or west, north or south? What will it cost. The answer he is given is there is only one way and it is through Jesus. Does this mean that if we have a friend or relative who doesn't go to church, they do not have a chance to be saved. Only Jesus can answer that because only Jesus can see into a person's heart. All I can say is, going to church can be a great help in growing in the love Christ desires from us and in following the way that Jesus has taught us.

Philip seems to be a bit like Thomas. He wants to see all this stuff we believe in, but he doesn't understand that faith is the only way we can see some things; for example, when two people marry they can't see the future or whether they will be happy together; they can only have faith in the goodness and the love of one another. Or when a doctor tells a patient they need a certain treatment or a certain medicine, the ordinary person can't medically prove the doctor is right about their condition or, unless they are pharmacists, they can't chemically prove that such and such a medication will benefit them. It's only through faith that they can "see" that their doctor is giving them the right advice. Jesus tells Philip we can only see God through seeing Jesus and we can only see Jesus through faith, prayer, the Scriptures, the sacraments and through love.

It is faith that has brought us here today. We have to dig deep into our own faith as we do every time we come to Mass. We believe Jesus is with us as we come together in prayer for he said: "where two or three gather in my name I am in their midst." (*Mt. 18,20*) When we hear the gospels, we believe Jesus is speaking to us. When we receive Communion we are making an act of faith in Jesus' love and his presence with us. When we make our donation, we are making an act of faith that Church is a good thing and helping others is a good thing. Thank you for being here. It is my privilege and joy to pray with you. May God bless all of you with a strong faith. Amen.

## **Sixth Sunday of Easter – A Cycle**

**May 21, 2017**

**INTRODUCTION:** (*Acts, 8,5-8.14-17; I Peter 3,15-18; John 14,15-21*)

St. Luke's *Acts of the Apostles* tells us how the message of Christ spread throughout the Mediterranean world starting at Jerusalem. The power behind this growth was the Holy Spirit and the risen (yet invisible) presence of our Lord. As the ministry grew, the Apostolic leaders needed more helpers and so last week we heard how they chose seven other men who were ordained to serve, men we now call deacons. Initially they helped with the daily distribution of food to the poor and widows, but it wasn't long before they were preaching the gospel of Christ. The first martyr, Steven, was one of these seven. Another one of the deacons, Philip, whose name we hear in today's first reading, was the first to announce the good news of the resurrection of Jesus in Samaria. The Samaritans were hostile to the Jews and vice versa, but the gospel was well received there.

## **HOMILY**

Our setting for today's gospel is the Last Supper. This was a celebration of the feast of Passover. It was a joyful religious celebration. I would suppose the apostles were enjoying themselves, but I would certainly expect that Jesus felt some apprehension. Jesus knew what he would be facing in a few hours. In spite of three times when Jesus informed his apostles of the sufferings he would soon endure, they never seemed to grasp what he was telling them until it happened. They were surely troubled when Jesus told them he was going to be betrayed by one of the Twelve or when Jesus washed each apostle's feet. Other than those two things, they were probably having a good time. Most of all, they didn't understand all that Jesus was trying to tell them. That's why he told them they needed to wait for the Holy Spirit who would clarify everything for them.

Today's gospel assured them he was not going to abandon them. When he was no longer with them in a way in which they could see him physically, he would be with them in a spiritual way. The Father would be with them and also the Holy Spirit. He tells them to keep loving him. He tells them how to know they are loving him - keep my commandments (notice the word is plural). This is one of the things many people are confused about – especially in our culture today when love seems to have only one meaning. People think their love for God should always bring them good feelings or they are not loving God as they should. Good feelings come at times. Our love for Jesus is not measured by feelings but by how we keep our Lord's commandments. That will be the proof of our love.

The result of keeping his commandments will be that God will reveal himself to us. The reward of keeping his commandments is that we will see Jesus, we will recognize him for he will be with us and in us. We will not be like orphans with no one to care for us. Christ and the Spirit and the Father will be present with us.

Jesus said "in a little while the world will not see me, but you will see me." What is that little while? It could be the time when Jesus was in the tomb, but most probably it is the time before the end of the world. All these things Jesus is saying apply to all of Christ's disciples in any age. For he said "on that day" you will recognize I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I in you. "On that day" usually refers to the end of time.

Our reading today is a very short, but powerful, one assuring us that if we follow God's word we are loving him in the way he wants us to and the more we open ourselves to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the more they will be present to us and reveal themselves to us. Amen.

**Feast of the Ascension – A Cycle**

**May 28, 2017**

We just heard the conclusion to Matthew's gospel. Jesus met with the Apostles in Galilee where he commissioned them to teach the gospel to all nations, convert as many as they could and baptize them, and teach them to observe all that Jesus taught. Then Jesus promised he would be with them always. Notice there is no mention of an

ascension. In Mark's gospel, we have an appearance on Easter Sunday evening with some instructions to the Apostles. After instructing them, we find one verse telling us Jesus was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. There is mention of an ascension in John when Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and tells her: "stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father." (*Jn 20,17*) That same night (Easter evening), Jesus shows he must have ascended because he breathes the Holy Spirit on the disciples when he appeared to them. Last, the ascension in Luke's gospel took place on Easter Sunday evening from Bethany after Jesus had appeared to them. In all the gospels, if there is an ascension mentioned, it is spoken of as having happened on Easter Sunday evening. In opposition to that is St. Luke's version of the ascension in the Acts of the Apostles as happening 40 days after Easter. St. Luke seems to completely contradict himself since he wrote both the gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Since there's nothing to suggest that Luke was losing his mind, obviously there is a lot more to the ascension than Jesus' body being raised up and entering heaven. The scholars I have read interpret the ascension theologically as his return to the Father and being seated at God's right hand. It was his glorification, and his human flesh was endowed with all power in heaven and on earth. After the resurrection, Jesus made frequent appearances to his followers. The scene described in the Acts is more or less his final apparition to them. On that occasion, the apostles were encouraged to get busy proclaiming the gospel and converting the world and not to just stand there staring into the sky.

So where does this leave us. Shall we just sit around waiting for Jesus to come back? No one has any idea when that might happen - although we should always be ready spiritually for it to happen. St. Leo the Great tells us "Christ's Ascension is our own ascension; our body has the hope of one day being where its glorious Head has preceded it." In fact, Jesus had said at the Last Supper: "in my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be." (*Jn 14, 2&3*) We read in the letter to the Colossians: "If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth." (*Colossians, 1,1-2*)

We can get so involved in living our daily lives that we forget that we are called to also live in the spirit. God has better things ahead for us. We do not want to lose the eternal life and love he has created for us to enjoy. What should the ascension mean for us: it is a feast that reminds us of the eternal life we are called to. Amen.