

Passion Sunday

April 5, 2009

A week's events in the life of Jesus are compressed into one hour today, from the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to the Last Supper to Jesus' arrest, crucifixion and burial. Throughout this week we will reflect on these important events in a less hurried way. If we could all get to liturgy on Holy Thursday and Good Friday, we would not need to hear the passion read today, but not everyone can get to church during the week, so we need to hear the passion today so we can celebrate Jesus' resurrection next Sunday.

However, I would urge everyone to read the gospel again this week so you can reflect more deeply on Jesus' sacrifice of himself for us. Every year I ask myself why he did it. Every year I think I understand it a little more and yet it will always remain a mystery. Jesus said he came "to seek out and to save the one who is lost." Could he have done that without having to die? Maybe that's what he agonized over in the garden of Gethsemani, asking himself and his heavenly Father the same question.

We too have our struggles to understand suffering. It's amazing how many people want to blame suffering on God. We know it was part of Jesus' mission and God's plan. He prayed "not my will but thine be done." When problems arise for us does it make sense to think this is God's will for us? A lot of people do. For some it helps them cope with tragedy, while others turn their back on God and claim he is cruel and unfair. If we stop and think about life, so many problems we deal with we create for ourselves, or some other individual uses their God-given gift of free will in a way that damages us, or our problems come just because we're human and we grow old and body parts begin to wear out. Or there are times when it's a matter of bad luck, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. We can't always put our finger on why bad things happen, especially to good people, a question that philosophers and theologians have pondered over for centuries. I believe all good things come from God, but there are precious few of the bad things in life that I attribute to God's will. I believe God came to save us from evil, even physical evil (that's why Jesus healed people and why he told us to care about people who were suffering from not having the necessities of life). I don't even know if God plans when he is going to call each of us to leave this world, but eventually it will happen. It's part of our faith and comforting to know, however, that when it happens, if we have served him faithfully, God will take us to himself.

What keeps me going and helps me stay positive is to believe that when bad things happen that are beyond our control, God can turn them into something good. If God could take the death of Jesus, indeed a very evil thing in that we human beings, created in the image and likeness of God, crucified our God – even though he only helped people and loved people, if God could take that and turn it into something good and make it the source of our salvation and eternal life, then God has the power to turn anything around and make it into something good. Sometimes I ask, "God how are you going to bring something good out of this?" My faith is he can and he will and I believe it because I've experienced this all through my life.

Today we reflect on the mystery of suffering, Jesus' suffering and our own. It's not a problem to solve but a mystery we have to live with. Especially at Mass today, as at every Mass, we recall what Jesus did for us. We do, in his memory, what he commanded us. We are assured that in his sufferings he was there before us, he knows what it's like and he will walk with us through bad times and will pull us through. Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. Amen.

Holy Thursday

April 9, 2009

Fran told me two weeks ago this is the time of the year when people hang up on her when she calls. That's because for years Fran has been so kind as to recruit people for the foot washing. A lot of people avoid talking to her as we get closer to Holy Thursday. People react like Peter: "Fr. Joe will never wash my feet." Well, I'll admit it is humbling to have your pastor kneel in front of you and wash your feet. For me, though, it's not very humbling at all. I think it's very special. But in Jesus' day it was a different story. It was a dirty job. People in those days didn't wear shoes and socks. They wore something more like sandals, and most people walked when they went anywhere. They walked the same dusty, dirty roads that herds of animals walked on. So you can imagine people's feet were dirty and smelly. Having their feet washed when they went to someone's house for dinner would have been refreshing. But the master of the house didn't do the foot washing. Slaves or servants did that job and where there were no slaves or servants, the children or the wife did it. I suppose if I wanted to be really humble, I would go wash the feet of several homeless people and have no audience or pretty singing while I was doing it. But we do it tonight to dramatize what Jesus did.

One of our candidates for foot washing remarked, "I don't know what to think about this." Well, Jesus did a lot of teaching and a lot of healing and helping people. But this last night with his apostles before his death, he wanted to really do something off the wall that would stick with them and symbolize what he was all about. So he told them how to think about what he had done. He said: "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." He had previously told us, "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave." He gave us an example of the great commandment of love; that we should love one another as he has loved us.

But there was an interesting interchange between Jesus and Peter. When Jesus came to Peter, Peter basically asked, "why are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus said, "you don't understand now why I'm doing it, you will understand later." Peter protested, "you will never wash my feet." Jesus said (and I like this translation better), "If I do not wash you, you won't belong to me." That is as strong a statement as Jesus could have made. I asked myself why Jesus was so definite

and why was it so important that everyone have their feet washed, even Peter? Thinking of what Jesus was doing as a demonstration of service, it struck me that we all need to allow ourselves to let Jesus serve us. In what ways does he serve us? He serves us through his sacrificial death on the cross and his resurrection. In his words, he came to seek out and to save the one who is lost; and that's all of us. It's only when we know we need to be saved that we will really know Jesus for that's what the name "Jesus" means: God saves. How do we make this connection with his saving love? Two ways: prayer and the sacraments. In those two ways Jesus can serve us and save us.

Especially in the Eucharist does Jesus come to us to bring us the love and life he wants to share with us. He makes himself vulnerable to us. We can receive him with love, we can receive him with indifference, we can receive him with distraction, we can be too busy to bother coming to receive him at all. But for those who open the door of their heart to him, he is there to share a meal with us as friends. (Rev. 3, 20) What greater gift can he give us than himself. "My flesh is real food and my blood real drink," he tells us in John's sixth chapter on the Eucharist.

Tonight we recall Jesus' last supper with his disciples. He came to serve them and he did serve them as their teacher and Lord, but now he was about to serve them (and all of us) by his death on a cross. He demonstrated to us how we are to serve one another and gave us a command to do so. And at the Last Supper he gave us a way to remember what he has done for us and how he continues to bring us into union with his saving work, the Eucharist. "Do this in memory of me" we hear him say twice in tonight's second reading, the oldest recorded account of the institution of the Eucharist.

We may not understand it all, we may not understand why Jesus had to die to save us, we may not understand how a small host and a sip of wine can bring Jesus to us, we may not even understand why God would love us so much as to send his Son to save us, but as Jesus said to Peter: "you will understand later." Amen.

Easter

April 12, 2009

This funny story is old, but even if you've heard it before, you might enjoy it again. There was an old couple who argued a lot, and they decided to travel before they died. One place they wanted to see was Israel. While they were there, the wife died. When the husband tried to see what arrangements he could make for her funeral, the mortician told him she could be buried in Israel for \$2,000 or they could send her body home to the United States, but it would cost \$20,000 to transport her. He thought for a moment and said we'll send her to the United States. A friend asked why he would spend so much money to send her back home. He said, "one time a person rose from the dead here in Israel and I can't take that chance."

Our faith tells us one person did indeed rise from the dead, Jesus Christ, and if it weren't for his resurrection we would never have heard of him. He was a good and holy man who was a wise teacher and a powerful healer but, unlike with other religious leaders, if it weren't for Jesus' actual resurrection, his followers would never have had the courage to preach about him to the world. [for Sunday morning: Remember Peter who denied Christ. We hear him preaching with boldness to a pagan audience in today's first reading.] The apostles had nothing to gain in this world from talking about him except rejection and martyrdom. But they had to proclaim him to the world because they had seen him after the resurrection, he sent them out to continue his work, he promised to be with them and they wanted to be with him and these things they couldn't deny.

Their "good news" about the resurrection spread against all odds, persecution, heresy, sinful leadership and a way of life that demanded unselfishness and self-sacrifice. Their promise was a promise of new life, eternal life, to those who heard the "good news" and believed in it. Their promise was a promise of risen life for those who are born again into Christ's life. We hear Paul proclaim this in today's epistle: "we were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life." (Rom 6,4 – from Vigil) This is echoed in our epistle for Easter Sunday from Colossians "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory." (Col 3,3-4 – Easter Sunday).

Our bodies will rise again on the last day, but not all will rise to glory. The bible tells us in the book of Daniel: "Many of those whose bodies lie dead and buried will rise up, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt." (Dan. 12,2) It is not our place to decide which group certain of our acquaintances might end up in. We cannot judge anyone's heart, only God can. It's our place to know that we are saved, not by our own power, but through our union with the glorified and risen Christ and to find peace in knowing that God's mercy is offered to all who seek him.

And that is the challenge of the resurrection. Again, quoting 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." (Col. 3,1-2) If we want to live new life with Christ in eternity, we must live his new life now.

Hopefully, our Easter celebration will inspire us to leave today with a new resolve to praise the Lord (this is what "Alleluia" means) and to rejoice and be glad because this is the day the Lord has made; this is the day that is a source of hope and salvation for us. Amen.

Second Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2009

INTRODUCTION: I've asked you to greet one another as Mass began in order to create a sense of community. This is an important theme in today's Scriptures. People often ask me, for example: "who is that person who sits in such and such a place at the 10:00 Mass." We have great people in our parish but most people do not know it. They just know a few close friends perhaps. It would be so easy when you are on the way to church or after Mass to just go up to someone you don't know, put out your hand and say: "hello, I'm so and so. What's your name?" If you forget it the next time you see them ask again. I do it all the time. The theme of community is expressed in today's first reading by the care the early Christians had for one another. Unfortunately, this idyllic moment for the early Church did not last. There were those who tried to cheat on the system of sharing their possessions in common, there were defections from the community when persecutions came, there were heresies and there were those who broke away and began a church of their own. The unity Jesus prayed for so earnestly at the Last Supper was short-lived.

HOMILY: We heard about the early Christians' love for one another. How they loved one another was one of the big attractions of the early Church. In today's gospel, there is another very clear picture of how important community is. The apostles were gathered together on Easter Sunday night when Jesus appeared to them. But Thomas wasn't with them. We're not told why. Maybe he was daring enough to go out for food and supplies while the others huddled together in fear that the Roman soldiers or the Jewish religious leaders might come to get them next, maybe he was depressed and wanted to be left alone, maybe he just went out for a walk. For whatever reason Thomas missed getting to see Jesus. He was absent from the community. While all the other apostles as well as the women who had seen Jesus earlier in the day were excited about the resurrection, he must have had a miserable week. It's interesting that it wasn't until a week later when Jesus showed himself again. This second appearance is likely an indication, perhaps inspired by Jesus himself, that, from the beginning, the first day of the week was to be the day for the Christian assembly to gather together to celebrate and to participate in Jesus' saving death and resurrection.

When Thomas was with the others Jesus appeared again. Thomas came to believe. This event shows us how hard it is to believe sometimes, and it also shows us how gathering with the faith community can help our own faith. We don't know whether Thomas actually felt Jesus' hands and side, but Thomas' mind and heart moved beyond mere physical recognition to the most explicit profession of faith in Christ to be found in the Scriptures: "My lord and my God." It is an expression we were taught to say to ourselves when the priest held up the host and the chalice at the consecration. I still say it in my mind. I wonder how many other people do.

Even the forgiveness of sins, a spiritual power which Christ entrusted to his apostles and which we hear about in today's gospel, when it was officially administered sacramentally, was, originally, administered not privately, but was expressed as a reconciliation with the community. People who had sinned seriously were, in effect, excommunicated; they could not participate in the Mass or Communion and they had to do penance before they could officially rejoin the community. That's the way the sacrament of reconciliation was performed in the first few

hundred years of the Church's history.

St. Paul tells us people who think they don't need the Church are like a part of the body that says I don't need the rest of the body. We need to be part of a faith community to be nourished spiritually. Jesus promised he would be with us when two or three are gathered together in his name. As he tells us in John 6, we especially need to meet him weekly in the Eucharist to be taught by him in the Scriptures and to be fed by his body and blood without which there is no life in us.

May our gathering together today help us experience his peace, recognize him in faith, unite us with him in love, and deepen our love for one another. Amen.

Third Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2009

INTRODUCTION: We take so many of our blessings for granted until, God forbid, we lose one. Take for example the ability to walk. We injure a knee or some part wears out and we find it painful or impossible to do many of the things we just took for granted. What if we were lame from birth and could never join in other kids' games because we couldn't run or walk. There used to be a sick joke about a kid like that who wanted to be on the local baseball team, so his buddies let him play and they used him for third base!

A very short time after Jesus' ascension Peter and John were on their way to the Temple to pray. There was a lame man sitting at the Temple entrance. In that culture, it was bad enough to be handicapped, but a person like that was looked down upon because it was everyone's belief that he must have been a great sinner and he was suffering for his sins. The lame man asked Peter and John for a little money as they passed. Peter said, "I don't have any money, but I will give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk." Then Peter helped him to his feet and he was healed. He was so excited, he jumped and danced and praised God. Of course, this created quite a commotion and everyone wondered what had happened. Peter took the opportunity to explain. He credits it all to Jesus. Today's first reading is part of his explanation.

HOMILY: I'm sure most of us have had wonderful life-changing events we could talk about, getting a good job; meeting a wonderful person who changed our life, whether it was a teacher, a friend, or someone who eventually became our spouse; the birth of a dearly loved son or daughter; inheriting a large sum of money; finding a cure for a chronic illness. The lame man I talked about in my introduction, whose healing is described in the third chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, certainly had his life changed dramatically by this encounter with Peter and John.

Today we hear again about the Resurrection of Jesus. Easter is too big a feast to celebrate just

one day. We celebrate it for fifty days, and then we continue to celebrate it every Sunday when we gather in faith to meet our risen Lord in the Eucharist. Our gospel today takes us back to Easter Sunday. In the afternoon of Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to two of his disciples. They were walking away from Jerusalem, discouraged and depressed over Jesus' death. Jesus walked with them, talked to them about the Scriptures, and when he broke bread with them they recognized him. They came running back to the upper room to tell the others. When they got there, they were told Jesus had appeared to Peter and then suddenly Jesus appeared to all of them. In spite of the appearances in the early morning to the women, to the two disciples, and to Peter, Luke tells us the apostles were "terribly frightened." I suppose that would be a normal reaction. Jesus assured them he was very much alive and very well. They could see him and touch him. To give them further proof, he asked for something to eat. He ate something they themselves had prepared to convince them he was real and that they weren't seeing a ghost or seeing him was something out of their own imagination. I have to pause here to tell you something cute. I've told this before so pardon me for repeating it: A mother proudly told her pastor: "My teenage son has finally learned one bible verse. It's Luke 24, verse 41 where Jesus says to his disciples: 'Do you have anything here to eat?'"

Whatever wonderful life-changing events we might think of, the Resurrection of Jesus is the most wonderful life-changing event ever. Because Jesus rose from the dead, our world is a different world. Because Jesus rose from the dead, evil and hatred and suffering have been overpowered. They still hang around inflicting difficulties on us, but their power has been broken by the glory of the Resurrection. Because Jesus rose from the dead, death no longer has the last word over any of us. Death has been overcome by life, eternal life. Even sin will not win out, but forgiveness in Jesus' name will destroy sin. Sin and evil will keep on trying to pull us down and destroy us, but in Christ we are raised up. We must be careful not to give in to sin's destructiveness, John tells us in today's second reading, and the way not to give in is to keep his commandments so his love can be perfected in us. Because Jesus rose from the dead, even fear cannot hold on to us for long, for Jesus came to us offering us peace. Notice that Jesus' first word to the apostles was "peace." Our world is a totally different world now after Jesus' Resurrection. But if it continues to look the same to all of us, with evil and hatred and suffering, maybe we who have been changed by the resurrection are not doing what Jesus said to do. We heard him say at the end of today's gospel: "you are witnesses of these things." This world-changing event has happened and we hope to share in its blessings. It partly depends on us, however, to bring those blessings to the world around us through the witness of our lives, our goodness, our love, our peace and our joy. Let's pause for a moment to ask ourselves how we can witness more fully the Resurrection. Amen.