

Passion Sunday - B cycle

April 1, 2012

INTRODUCTION: Five hundred years before Christ, a person was described in the Book of Isaiah as God's Servant. The Servant was not identified by name, only by the way the Servant faithfully followed God's call, a call to bring justice to the earth and light to the nations, a call that would result in sacrifice and suffering for the people he came to help. These Servant passages (there are four of them, sometimes called Servant Songs) marvelously describe Jesus. Today's first reading is the first part of the third Servant Song. The first reading is followed by Psalm 22, a meditation on the sufferings of a just person. The first line of this Psalm Jesus prayed as he hung on the cross.

HOMILY: The Missal instructs us that today the homily should be brief. If there were any moment of earthly glory for Jesus, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem with people spreading garments and branches in his path was that moment of glory. The people called to him Hosanna (which means "save us") and they recognized that he was coming as Son of David to establish the reign of God. Jesus knew their enthusiasm would be short-lived. He said in John (3,19) "the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." Three times he predicted his suffering and death. Even though people can turn away from his light, his light can never be extinguished. It continues to shine for those who welcome it.

He entered Jerusalem in humility and poverty. He is a king who has not come to gain victory by force. He only knocks, and waits for us to open the door. Then he will change our lives, helping us to walk the path he walked, a humble path that leads to the death of our own selfish desires and to our loving others with a sacrificial love like his own.

Like Jesus, we will not very often hear the cheers of the crowd as we make our journey toward eternal life. Mostly our lives will be defined by prayer and obedience to God and by small acts of love for one another. We ask his help to be with us as we make our journey to be with him.

Amen.

(I borrowed greatly from A Devotional Commentary on Mark by Leo Zanchettin).

Good Friday

April 6, 2012

"We thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed."

These words of the prophet were written 500 years before Christ. They describe God's Servant who suffered, not for his own sins, but for those of others. This was a difficult concept for God's

people to grasp back at that time. According to their theology, if a person was a good person, God rewarded them and if a person was a bad person, God punished them. Since they had no real understanding of heaven and hell at that time in history, they had to conclude that reward and punishment would come about in this life. Thus, the Servant we heard about in today's first reading, who was stricken and afflicted, was thought of as suffering for something evil he, the Servant (whoever it was) must have done. Thus the verse I quoted said: "We thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted" (as though he had been evil).

Another facet of their theology and a major part of their religious practice was offering sacrifices to God. Their sacrifice would be a lamb or an ox or usually another kind of food. The sacrifice they offered was meant to symbolize the gift of themselves to God - a gift they offered to give worship to God, or to ask for a special favor or to seek God's forgiveness for their sins. This made sense to them, that they could offer a sacrifice for something bad they had done hoping God would forgive them. The passage about the Servant introduces a new idea, the idea that someone could offer a sacrifice for the sins of another and make reparation for the evil someone else had done. This was hard for them to understand (hard for us to understand) that the Servant "was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins." The Servant's suffering was really serving as a sacrifice before God, and it would bring down God's blessings on his people. This is a conclusion St. Paul came to about Jesus. Paul was initially a persecutor of those who accepted Jesus as their Savior and Messiah. He was involved in the killing of Stephan the first martyr. He persecuted the Church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. (Gal. 1,13) It was considered blasphemy that proclaimed faith in Jesus as Savior and Messiah. Jesus was, after all, a condemned criminal. The Book of Deuteronomy says, "God's curse rests on him who hangs upon a tree." (Deut 21,23) Thus the Jews believed that if God's curse was on Jesus, how could he be considered their Savior and Messiah. But Paul discovered that Jesus became a "curse for us," (Gal. 3,13) and this is how he made that discovery. The risen Jesus appeared to him. It became obvious to Paul that Jesus was not a dead criminal but one uniquely blessed by God. If God had showed him such a unique favor, Jesus must have pleased God in a most unique way. God is not in the habit of bringing people back to life. Jesus did bring a few people back to life, but it was back to the life they had had before. But the risen Jesus enjoyed a life of glory. The Acts of the Apostles describe a Jesus who appeared to Paul in a brilliant light, brighter than the sun in midday. (Acts 26,13) Paul seems to have recognized that Jesus' death could not have been God's curse upon Jesus; it could not have been an accident; it could not have been a punishment for something evil; it had to have been a special blessing from God. It could only have resulted from Jesus' special obedience and love for God. Since, in the Jewish mind death came as the result of sin, Jesus must have borne the curse of death not for anything he had done, but for others. In other words, Jesus' death was a sacrifice for the sins of others. We are freed from our sins if we accept his sacrifice by faith and trust in Christ's death for our salvation. Jesus gave us sacraments, especially Baptism and the Eucharist, to enable us to participate in his saving death. So Paul, the zealous persecutor of the Church, became the zealous defender of the Church and the zealous Apostle and preacher of Jesus as Savior and Messiah. Central to his preaching was the death and resurrection of Jesus. He writes to the Corinthians: "When I came to you proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with lofty words or wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (1 Cor. 2,1-2)

This process of viewing Paul's thinking about Jesus' death and resurrection makes sense to me; it has helped me to understand Jesus' death a little better and, hopefully, it will help you too. Let me end by quoting Isaiah once more: "We thought of him as stricken, as one smitten by God and afflicted. But he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins; upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed."

(borrowed much from Professor Bart Ehrman in his series of lectures on The New Testament, produced by The Teaching Company, Lecture 14)

Easter Vigil & Easter

April 7/8, 2012

A very dedicated parishioner had died and the pastor was sick. Nevertheless, the pastor felt he had to do the funeral services and go to the cemetery, which was 50 miles out of town. To make it easier for the pastor, the funeral director let the pastor ride with him in the front seat of the hearse as they went to the cemetery. After the prayers at the cemetery, the pastor felt even worse and the funeral director suggested that the pastor lie down in the back of the hearse now that the deceased had been buried. On the way home the funeral director stopped to get gas. As the attendant was filling the gas tank, the pastor woke up and peeked out the side window of the hearse. That's when the gas station attendant became a believer in the resurrection. (from The Joyful Noiseletter, May-June, 2011, pg 2)

This year most of our gospel readings are from St. Mark. The gospel we just listened to is considered by almost all scholars to be the way St. Mark originally ended his gospel. Although Mark's gospel does tell us about Jesus appearing to the apostles and to many others, it's not something that Mark himself added. Certainly Mark knew about the many appearances of Jesus after the resurrection for Paul tells us about them in his letters, letters that were written 5, 10, 15 years before Mark's gospel was written. Mark ends his gospel by telling us the tomb was empty when some women came looking for Jesus. An angel told the women the reason it was empty was because Jesus had risen. Perhaps in ending this way, Mark wanted us to ask ourselves what the empty tomb means in our lives. Do we believe, as St. Paul tells us, that as Christ was raised from the dead, we too, through our baptism, have come to live in newness of life?

A couple of weeks ago, a friend wrote me a very sad letter. She is divorced, is suffering from physical problems and is depressed. She said "Everyday, everywhere someone is facing a hardship in life." "It's easier to think about a loving God when things are going right. The world is in such a state, how does one stay hopeful?"

Hope grows out of faith. It all depends on what we believe; that is, what we tell ourselves. If we believe that things are hopeless and they will only get worse, then we will be depressed. If we believe that even when things seem hopeless, God will ultimately get us through it all and lead us to a joy that will never end, then we will have hope. This is what Jesus told his apostles at the

Last Supper: "You are now in anguish, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you." That's what I tell myself when I'm worried or troubled - that God will make something good come out of this event or this situation. Easter is where we find the faith that brings true and positive hope. We believe that Jesus died and Jesus truly rose from the dead. As St. Paul reminds us, we believe that the destiny of Jesus is also our destiny. We believe that our human body and spirit shares in God's image and likeness. We believe that we, along with all our loved ones who have loved God, will, through the life giving power of God, transformed and live forever. Easter is the "ground-zero" of our faith and the source of all our hope. And so we say, Alleluia (praise the Lord.)

Second Sunday of Easter- B Cycle

April 15, 2012

INTRODUCTION: As most of you know, the Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke, the same Luke that wrote the third gospel. Our first readings, from now until the end of May, will be from the Acts. Luke tells us today about the early Christian community. It must have been very early in the life of the Church because Luke tells us it wasn't long until their system of sharing all things in common began to fall apart. Paul tells us about the problems he had in dealing with the Churches he founded that caused him great anxiety. But for a short time in the beginning, the early Church was of one mind and one heart.

HOMILY: I want to start with a passage from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Although it is read at Sunday Mass once every three years, I want us to reflect on it now since it is the earliest written account of the resurrection that we possess. Paul writes: "for I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; that he was seen by Peter, and then by the Twelve Apostles. After that he was seen by more than five hundred of his followers at one time, most of whom are still living, though some have died by now. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, I saw him too, long after the others, as though I had been born at the wrong time." (1 Cor. 15, 3-8) Paul wrote this sometime around the year 54, which was before any of the gospels were written. When Paul says, "I handed on to you what I also received..." Paul is telling us this has been the Tradition of the Church from the very beginning. Notice Paul refers to some appearances that the gospels do not mention and the gospels mention some that Paul does not. All this week at Mass, and today as well as next Sunday, we hear about Jesus' appearances. Since the apostles were going to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, they had to have seen him alive. They couldn't witness to what they had not seen. Fortified by strength from the Holy Spirit, they were willing to die for what they proclaimed was true. This is the foundation of our faith.

Today's gospel is appropriately timed for this Sunday in that Jesus appeared on Easter Sunday to the apostles and then he appeared again on the following Sunday. Thomas missed out on his

first appearance and, being a hard person to convince, he wouldn't believe anyone - the women who saw Jesus Easter morning, the two disciples who saw Jesus Easter Sunday afternoon, and the ten other apostles. (Judas is gone by now you know). So a week later Jesus gave Thomas all the proof he needed. This is the one place in the gospels that tells us Jesus was nailed to the cross, and not just tied to the cross as sometimes happened. Thomas' act of faith, "My Lord and My God," went beyond what Thomas could see with his eyes or touch with his hands. His eyes and his hands gave him proof that Jesus was risen from the dead. Thomas, however, could not see that Jesus was God. It was a pure act of faith for Thomas to declare, "My Lord and my God." Faith is our assent to what we cannot see or touch. Sometimes we can feel God's presence and sometimes we can't, but through faith we always know God is with us and we are one with his Son through grace and the Holy Spirit. Especially we take it on faith that when Jesus said, "This is my body" and "this is the chalice of my blood," the risen Christ is really present to us, even if we cannot see him as the disciples were privileged to do. It is more important to believe in Jesus than to see him - for a lot of people saw Jesus in his lifetime, but they didn't believe. After the resurrection, only those who believed in him saw him; so in our relations with God we can't live by the motto "seeing is believing." The motto we have to live by when it comes to our relationship with God is "believing will lead to seeing." Our believing will bring us to see him for all eternity. So, as Jesus always does, he spoke the truth when he said, "blessed are those who have not seen but have believed."

Recently I heard the story about a man who lost the wife to whom he was married for 70 years and whom he loved deeply. His children were trying to console him, telling him his wife was in a better place (which I'm sure she was - she was a devout believer); they were telling him she was with her parents and her relatives and friends whom she loved; that she was with Jesus. One of their sons, though, told his dad, when you are dead, that is the end of you; there is nothing afterwards. I was horrified by his lack of sensitivity toward his father, trying to deprive his father of any comfort his father might have had through faith in the after life. Furthermore, I thought how would this son know for sure there is nothing? No one knows for sure except someone who has been there. Only Jesus comes from the other side to tell us what's there. The boy who said death is the end is only saying what he chooses to believe, that is what his faith tells him (his belief) - that death is the end of it all. I dare say I could support my faith a lot better than this young boy could support his. Modern psychology had done a lot of study on near-death experiences and this study has shown that there is a lot to look forward to on the other side when our life in this world has come to an end. Most of all, our Christian faith tells us there is life eternal with Jesus and with each other in God. Jesus' resurrection is the preview of what God has planned for all of us who believe in Jesus. Amen.

Third Sunday of Easter- B Cycle

April 22, 2012

INTRODUCTION: In our first reading, there is no mention of a crippled man being healed by Peter and John, but this is the context of Peter's speech that we are about to hear from the Acts of the Apostles. A man, lame from birth, was brought to the Temple every day so he could beg for alms. Remember, in the Jewish mentality of the time, this man was not only physically impaired, but everyone would have looked upon him as a very sin-full person. The Jews would have thought that God was punishing him for something he or his parents must have done. A short time after the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost, Peter and John went to the Temple for afternoon prayer. The lame man saw them and asked for a little money. 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. It was a perfect opportunity for Peter to explain the healing power of the risen Jesus. Notice Peter is very outspoken in accusing all of his Jewish listeners, not just their leaders, of rejecting Jesus and calling for his death. Peter said God can excuse them because they acted out of ignorance, but from now on they have no excuse, and they must repent and be converted for they had just seen the risen Jesus at work in the healing of the lame man. It is not the entire speech of Peter, but it is the most important part of it.

HOMILY: I came across an interesting parable the other day about an old pine tree. It was tall, 70 feet above the forest. Younger trees were also tall but none of them had a top as filled with foliage as the old pine. It was scarred from wind and lightening but it had survived every challenge that came along. Even when strong winds snapped off the younger pines, this old pine barely lost a needle. Amazingly, what finally destroyed this grand old pine tree was not a storm; it was a heavy snow that piled up on its branches. No one would be able to say which snowflake was the proverbial "last straw" that accomplished what years of storms had been unable to do, but the weight of many tiny snowflakes snapped off the old tree's magnificent and full crown.

The article where I read this parable was talking about debt. Most of us know that debt is something that can slowly-but-significantly erode one's economic ability to recover. One little thing can tip the scales from a person's carrying a lot of debt to becoming bankrupt?

However, I thought the parable was equally true of how sin can destroy us. Sin is a reality for all of us. St. John says at the beginning of his letter: "if we say, 'we are without sin,' we deceive ourselves. We confess as we begin each Mass that we are sinners and ask for God's mercy. Like tiny, innocuous looking snowflakes, sin can have a way of creeping up on us. We tell ourselves things like "oh, that's not so bad," or "everybody's doing it," or "God is forgiving," or "no one will know," "nobody's perfect," or whatever. For the most part, each of these statements can be absolutely true: it's not so bad, everybody's doing it, God is forgiving, no one will know, nobody's perfect but like little snowflakes that keep falling, we don't notice how certain habits

can grow. St. John tells us in today's second reading "I am writing this to you so that you may not commit sin." Before I move in a more positive direction with what I have to say about sin, I would like to insert what I believe is the most dangerous sin our culture has to deal with today - ignoring the Third Commandment, to keep holy the Lord's Day. To too many people it doesn't seem to be a big deal, yet it denies God the honor due to God and it breaks one's connection with the body of Christ, the community of believers, which gives us spiritual nourishment and guidance.

St. John has more to say about sin than to tell us we're all guilty. He goes on to say, "if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one." Our readings at this time of the year proclaim the resurrection, but they also continuously call us to live the new life Christ came to bring us and to turn away from whatever interferes with our relationship with our risen Lord. Did you notice how in last Sunday's gospel, the first thing Jesus said to the apostles after greeting them with "Peace be with you," he said "Receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive they are forgiven them"? In our first reading, Peter calls his listeners to repent and be converted that their sins may be wiped away. In today's gospel, Jesus tells his apostles, "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations..."

Dr. Karl Menninger, a well-known psychiatrist, wrote a very perceptive book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin*. He ends his book by saying the first thing we have to do to change anything about ourselves that perhaps we should change is to face it. Last Sunday is often designated as Diving Mercy Sunday. I'm all for Divine Mercy and I'm grateful that God's mercy is available any time we turn to him and ask his forgiveness. I suppose it's called Divine Mercy Sunday because of last week's gospel, but today has every right to be called Divine Mercy Sunday. Truly, on every Sunday, or every time we come to Mass, we begin asking for God's mercy. We say in the Our Father, "forgive us our trespasses;" we say before Communion, "Lord I am not worthy..."

I suppose if a person is burdened with guilt, Divine Mercy Sunday would be a good reminder that God is merciful and forgives us when we turn back to him, but we must always know God is kind and merciful. It's the way he identified himself to Moses (Exodus 34,6), the way he identified himself throughout the whole Old Testament, the way he presents himself to us in Jesus, and for that we give thanks.

Fourth Sunday of Easter- B Cycle

April 29, 2012

INTRODUCTION: Last week in my introduction to the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles I spoke about how Peter and John healed a crippled beggar in the Temple. The healed man jumped up and down and was walking around which caused a great amount of commotion in the Temple. Those who were in the Temple at the time wanted to know what happened and how it had happened. Peter's speech on that occasion was the first reading last week. Peter

gave all the credit to the risen Jesus who had healed the man through the Apostles. Many of the Jewish religious leaders did not believe in the possibility of a resurrection. When they heard what was going on, they arrested Peter and John. They didn't want to hear any more about Jesus who was a threat to their position. Today we hear a portion of Peter's testimony before the Jewish court. Notice not only what Peter had to say about Jesus but also his boldness. The court didn't know what to do with Peter and John for all the people in Jerusalem were excited and happy about the healing of the man who had been lame for over 40 years. So the court officials warned the Apostles not to talk about Jesus any more. The Apostles were not intimidated for they were now filled with the Holy Spirit. [Acts 4, 8-12]

HOMILY: Two ladies from New York had always lived a pretty sheltered life. One day they decided to take a trip to England. While they were touring the countryside, the one said to the other: "Look at those white cows. I've never seen cows like that before." The other replied: "Maybe they are albino. Or perhaps a special British type of cow." The guy sitting behind them said: "Those cows are sheep." Sheep are not as common a sight in the U.S. as they are in other countries - especially in the Middle East. On a trip several years ago, we saw a lot of sheep in Israel. Once or twice our tour bus had to stop for about five minutes or so as a very large flock of sheep crossed the road with their shepherd.

I know I've mentioned this before, but it was one of the most beautiful sights was as I was coming down Mt. Sinai. It took, I think, about eight hours to climb up and as we were coming down we saw a shepherdess with her little flock of sheep scattered on a nearby mountain trying to find bits and pieces of vegetation on the barren rocks. As we watched this peaceful scene as the sun was going down, she got out her shepherds' flute and started walking toward wherever she lived. As she played a little tune, the sheep all fell into line and followed her until they rounded a bend and were out of sight. Jesus says of the shepherd: "he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him." (Jn 10,4) Because sheep were a major part of Jewish life, culture and economy, Jesus' listeners could relate to what Jesus preached a lot more easily than we can.

What Jesus said about shepherds we would understand better by making comparisons with dedicated parents or security personnel such as the firemen and policemen and women who sacrificed their lives on 9/11 to save others.

One thing that will help us understand Jesus' parable of the good shepherd is to look back in the Old Testament to the Book of Ezekiel. God condemned the kings and priests at the time of the prophet Ezekiel (almost 600 years before Christ), because they were leading people away from God and not closer to God - which they should have done. Ezekiel compared the Jewish leaders to shepherds who had no concern for the sheep, the people, but they used the people only to enrich themselves. Ezekiel tells these wicked leaders: "Thus says the Lord God: I myself will look after and tend my sheep. In good pastures will I pasture them. I will give them rest, the lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal... shepherding them rightly." (Ezekiel, 34 11ff)

Jesus is the fulfillment of Ezekiel's prophecy. He continues to guide us to eternal life, if we will

follow him. We have all gone through those times when we don't know where he's taking us, perhaps many times. That's why he tells us to trust him.

I am reminded of a little story. A holy man took a trip to a town with which he was unfamiliar. He took with him a lamp, a rooster and a donkey. When he could not find a place to stay in the town, he went into the nearby woods to sleep. He lit his lamp to read the Scriptures, but a strong wind blew the lamp over and it broke. So he said, "all that God does, he does well" and fell asleep. During the night, wild animals chased away the rooster and thieves stole the donkey. When he woke as the sun came up, they were gone, yet the holy man said, "all that God does, he does well." He then went back into the village to see if any rooms where he could stay had become available. When he got there he discovered enemy soldiers had been there during the night and killed everyone in the town. He also learned these enemy soldiers had traveled through the part of the woods where he was sleeping. Had his lamp not been broken, he would have been discovered. Had not the rooster been chased, it would have crowed, giving him away. Had not the donkey been stolen, it would have brayed. So once more the holy man declared: "All that God does, he does well." We just have to be careful not to say that every bad thing that happens is God's doing. People do bad things against God's wise plan or against God's laws out of ignorance or evil or for whatever reason. We have to remember what Paul said: "for those who love God, everything works out for the best." Amen.