

5th Sunday in Lent – A Cycle April 6, 2014

INTRODUCTION: The first reading comes from about 600 years before Christ during the Babylonian exile. The prophet Ezekiel, who was in Babylon with the other Jewish exiles, had a vision of a field covered with dry bones. The field of dry bones represented God's people and their nation which was destroyed by the Babylonians. In his vision Ezekiel saw God join these bones together, cover them with flesh and breathe life into them. It was a prophetic vision that God would bring his exiled people back to their homes and to their land. Today's first reading concludes and interprets Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones. This reading emphasizes for us that God is the source of life and it prepares us for today's gospel which is about Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead.

HOMILY:

We just heard John tell us of the last and greatest of Jesus' signs. The first half of Jesus' gospel tells us of many signs Jesus worked: signs of his love, his power, his saving mission such as changing water into wine, healing the royal official's son, healing the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethesda, the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, walking on water and healing the man born blind which we heard last Sunday. These signs were carefully arranged by John to build up the one we just heard today, his last and greatest sign. Notice, John does not refer to these acts of supernatural power as miracles but as signs, because they all have a special significance; they indicate for us why Jesus came. Today's sign shows us most clearly why he came. As Jesus tells us in John's tenth chapter: "I came that they may have life, and may have it to the full." (Jn. 10,10)

Ironically, in raising his friend Lazarus back to life, Jesus is unleashing the fury of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. How did that happen? It's because many more people started to believe in Jesus after Jesus raised Lazarus back to life and the Jewish leaders grew more determined to get rid of Jesus. They also planned to kill Lazarus if they could. As a sign, today's miracle pointed into the past to encompass the other signs that tell us who Jesus was and why he came, but it also points into the future. The raising of Lazarus pointed to Jesus' own resurrection. There was a big difference between Lazarus' being raised back to life and Jesus' resurrection. Lazarus was raised back to the life he originally enjoyed; Jesus was raised to eternal glory. Lazarus would die again; Jesus would never die. So Lazarus came out of the tomb still wearing his burial garments, because he would need them again; when Jesus rose, he left his burial cloths in the tomb. He would not need them again.

I've told this story before. When I was in the Holy Land about 24 years ago, we visited all the places that were important in the gospels: Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, the Sea of Galilee, Mt. Tabor, Jerusalem, Gethsemane, Calvary - all of which were impressive and moving for me, but the most moving part of my travels was the tomb of Lazarus. I stood in the empty tomb, a small room which had been carved out of the rock with one little light bulb hanging down from the ceiling, and such a great sense of

awe came over me. These words of Jesus from today's gospel penetrated my whole being: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Overwhelmed, I thought: "whoever in the history of the world could ever make the tombs empty, and here I am, his disciple and his friend." After Jesus spoke these words of self-identification: "I am the resurrection and the life," he asked Martha: "do you believe this?" He also asks **us** that same question today. "Do you believe this?" (say "yes!") Of course you do. Otherwise why are you here? Amen.

Passion Sunday – A Cycle

April 13, 2014

Does anyone know what a kinkajou is? I came across this word for the first time this week and I had to look it up in a dictionary. A kinkajou is about the size of a large raccoon. It is related to the raccoon family and can be found in the wild in southern Mexico, Central America and the northern parts of South America. It has a strong tail it can use to hang from a tree limb; it has sharp claws and sharp teeth. A lady in Florida decided she wanted one for a pet. Having a dog was too commonplace, but having a pet kinkajou was really cool. It was a cute little pet when it was small, but when it experienced puberty for the first time, it went berserk. It tried to eat its own tail and tried to tear itself to pieces. The family was bitten and scratched trying to save the little creature from destroying itself. *(from National Geographic, April 2014, pg 118)*. You might be wondering why the family would subject themselves to getting bitten and clawed to save this little animal? The answer (and it's an important answer) is this. It was a wild animal and its nature showed itself at this mature stage of life. The nature of this family who loved their pet also showed itself in their efforts to save it from destroying itself. The nature of the wild animal conflicted with the nature of the caring family.

We just heard the story of Jesus giving his life for us. Many times I've been asked, "why did Jesus have to die?" The reason goes back to the fact that it was in his nature to save us and he could not stop doing everything he was trying to do to lead us to salvation. There are elements in our nature that are driven by selfishness, pride, jealousy, cruelty and all kinds of attitudes and behaviors that work against God's desire to save us. In Jesus' passion we saw intense and pure love on the part of Jesus (that was his nature to be that way) and we saw the dark side of human nature working against him and trying to destroy him.

Because it is in Jesus' nature to love, he continues to reach out to us in love. He speaks to us each week in the Scriptures, he nourishes us each week by feeding us with his own body and blood. He willingly shares his Spirit with us so that we can continue to live and love more like he does as we stumble along making our way to eternal happiness. Amen. *(thoughts from National Catholic Reporter 3/28 to 4/10/2014, pg 27)*

Good Friday

April 18, 2014

The first part of today's homily is taken from a homily by St. Aelred, a an abbot who was famous as an outstanding preacher in England, Scotland and Ireland in the 12th century. St. Aelred says: One of the most radical and difficult things Jesus asks of his followers is to Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. Anyone can love the person who loves them. The perfection of love lies in the love of one's enemies. Jesus not only told us to do this but he gave us an example. We read in Luke's gospel how Jesus prayed for those who were putting him to death: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." (Lk. 23,34) Think of this, people spat on him, blindfolded him, scourged his, crowned him with thorns, mocked and made fun of him and in the end nailed him to the cross and while remaining gentle, meek and full of peace he prayed: "Father, forgive them." Is any gentleness, any love, lacking in this prayer? Yet, it was not enough for him to pray for them, he wanted also to make excuses for them: "for they know not what they do." They are great sinners, yes, but they do not see what they are doing; therefore, "Father, forgive them." They are nailing me to a cross, but they do not know whom they are persecuting and killing: "if they had known they would never have crucified the Lord of glory;" (1 Cor. 2,8) therefore, "Father, forgive them." They think it is a lawbreaker, an impostor claiming to be God, a seducer of the people. I have hidden my face from them, and they do not recognize my glory; therefore, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." St. Aelred asks: How can we love with a heart like Jesus? We must keep the eyes of our inner self always fixed on the serene patience and love of our divine Lord and Savior.

I have a couple of thoughts I wish to add to St. Aelred's sermon. When Jesus uses the word "love," he's not talking about warm, fuzzy feelings. He's talking about having in us an effective desire for a person's well-being. That means not holding grudges and hatred in our hearts toward anyone. By effective, I mean a willingness to help a person who might need our help.

The second thing I want to add is that love for our enemies does not mean we have to let them walk all over us. We are allowed to stand up for ourselves. Remember when the servant of the high priest struck Jesus, Jesus didn't say, "here's my other cheek, you can hit me there too." He said, "why did you strike me?" Tell me what I did to deserve that. At other times he confronted the Jewish leaders with their rudeness to him and with their plotting to kill him. Even though he confronted them, he didn't try to retaliate or get even with them. A few times he even walked away when the Jews wanted to kill him. He could have walked away this time too, when Judas betrayed him. Notice how they all fell to the ground when Jesus said "I am" the mysterious name for God. But in God's plan this was the time for Jesus to give in, the time for him to lay down his life so that he could take it up again. (Jn. 10,17) And in taking it up again, he would draw all people to himself (Jn. 12,32) and make us sharers in his victory and in his new life. That hope of overcoming the power of death and sharing in Christ's glory

is one of the reasons why we celebrate Easter and why we call today GOOD Friday. Amen.

The first half of this homily are thoughts from the reading for the liturgy of the Hours for the Friday of the first week of Lent – a homily by St. Aelred, abbot.

Easter

April 20, 2014

St. Matthew, in his gospel, tells us that a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, a secret follower of Jesus, asked for Jesus' body when Jesus died. He buried Jesus in his own new tomb. Some clever person added this comment to Matthew's account: one of Joseph's friends asked him why he would give up his new tomb to this penniless preacher, who was just executed as a criminal. Joseph's answer was "not to worry. It's just for the weekend."

I want to say a few things about the empty tomb, because the empty tomb is one of the proofs of the resurrection. Even though Jesus predicted he would rise from the dead, no one really expected it to happen. It took a lot of convincing and appearing to the apostles to convince even his closest followers. Joseph of Arimathea would never have made such a remark that Jesus would need the tomb "just for the weekend."

That tomb is still empty; Joseph was never buried in it nor was anyone else. The early followers of Jesus continued to have immense reverence for Jesus' tomb and the early Christians, even almost three hundred years later, remembered where Jesus had been buried. What is impressive is 100 years after Jesus died, the Roman emperor Hadrian filled in the entire area and built a pagan temple, with a special shrine to Venus over the spot. It was almost 200 years after that when Constantine tore down the temple, excavated the area and found the tomb just where the Christians told him it would be. Today the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built over the tomb of Jesus.

The third thing about the tomb, according to Matthew, is that Pilate allowed the Jews to station guards at the tomb. Whether or not the guards saw Jesus rise, we do not know, but when the angel rolled back the stone that sealed the tomb, the guards were greatly frightened by the angel. The angel came to open the tomb, not so Jesus could come out, but that people could see in, to know that Jesus was no longer there, that he had risen. St. John tells us Jesus left behind the burial clothes; he would never need them again. The burial cloth that is honored as the Shroud of Turin is controversial, but I am convinced it is genuine.

Another proof of Jesus' resurrection are all the appearances of Jesus to his disciples and his friends. St. Paul gives us a whole list of people who saw and spoke with Jesus. Paul doesn't mention any of the women Jesus appeared to because women did not

have the legal standing of being able to be a witness. However, Jesus did not hesitate to make some of his women followers witnesses to his resurrection. When he appeared to them he told them to tell the apostles that he had risen. Mary Magdalene especially is frequently referred to as the apostle to the apostles. It wasn't just the witness of those who saw Jesus that convinces me that Jesus had really risen. It was that these witnesses were willing to die for what they said they had experienced. That's the important thing for me; no one is going to die for something they know is not true.

One more thing gives me confidence about the resurrection. It is an event Luke describes in the Acts of the Apostles. When the Jewish leaders were trying to keep the apostles from preaching about Jesus, the Jewish leaders were arguing about what might be effective. A Pharisee named Gamaliel proposed this argument: he said lots of other people have claimed to be the Messiah, but when they died, their followers dispersed. So if this Jesus is a fake, this whole movement will fall apart; however, if this Jesus is for real, we'll never stop people from following him or preaching about him, for we would be fighting against God himself. All we need to do is to look around the world today and see all the people who believe in Jesus to know that Gamaliel was right and Jesus is for real. (Acts of the Apostles, 5,34ff).

Personally, my belief in the resurrection of Jesus is my source of strength. I know he is with me in prayer, in the sacraments, in the work that I do, and I know he is with those I love who have moved on to the next life. I hear they now have a movie about the book *Heaven is for Real*. I read the book a few months ago and enjoyed it. I'm looking forward to seeing the movie. It fits in pretty well with other things I've read about near-death experiences.

I wish you all a deep faith in the resurrection of Jesus. It will be a source of strength for you, and I pray all of us one day may enjoy eternity in his kingdom. Amen.

Second Sunday of Easter – A Cycle

April 27, 2014

Introduction: (*Acts 2,42-47; 1 Peter 1,3-9; John 20,19-31*) In our first reading today, St. Luke gives us a lovely picture of the early Church - how it was one big happy family where everyone was agreeable with one another and cared about each other. If we read a little further in the Acts of the Apostles, we see this idyllic condition didn't last very long. Some members cheated on their socialistic system as persecutions came and as the Church kept growing. With almost one and one-third billion Catholics in the world today, we can hardly expect perfect harmony, but we remain united by four basic elements that St. Luke identifies for us in today's first reading: (1) holding to the teachings of the apostles, (2) to the communal life (trying to help one another to some degree – even if not totally sharing all our possessions), (3) celebration of the breaking of bread (their term for the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper) and (4) to prayer. This statement tells us that being a member of the Church is more than just a matter of saying we are a Catholic or having our name on some Church's roster. St. James'

famous statement: "Faith without works is dead," is another way of saying that an inactive believer is not a believer at all. (*James 2,17*)

Homily: We have an expression in the English language that characterizes the event John tells us about in today's gospel, "a doubting Thomas." Poor Thomas, he gets reviled because he seems to be lacking in faith. Well, Thomas did have faith; he was the one who spoke up when Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem and the other disciples tried to dissuade him from going. They said to him: "Rabbi, the Jews were but now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?" It was Thomas who said: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (Jn. 11,16).

Let me make one more reference to what is commonly viewed as Thomas' lack of faith. Actually, Thomas was not asking for anything that hadn't already been given to the other apostles. Easter Sunday they all saw Jesus; they saw his hands where the nails had been and the wound in his side that was large enough for a person to put their hand inside. Whether any of them touched him or not, we don't know, and we don't know whether Thomas touched him either. He just wanted the same opportunity the other apostles had. Once he was given that opportunity, he expressed one of the most profound acts of faith found in the Bible: "my Lord and my God." It was an expression of faith that sprang not so much from what he saw with his eyes, but what he saw with his mind and heart. It's an expression of faith that many people say in their own mind and heart when they see the priest raise the host and chalice at the consecration or when they are preparing to receive communion.

Why was it necessary for all the apostles (including Thomas) to see the risen Christ? Because they would be his witnesses to the world that Jesus had truly risen. That's the job Jesus gave them to do. As he told them before his ascension: "you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1,8) We have also been called to be witnesses even though we have not seen the risen Jesus; we are witnesses to our faith in Jesus, witnesses to the peace our faith gives us, the guidance, the sense of God's presence and God's love; we witness by our kindness, our honesty, our willingness to serve, our charity to the Church and to the poor, the time we take to pray, our forgiveness of those who have hurt us. In other words, people should be able to see God at work in us by the way we live.

I have a few other thoughts I need to mention. I want you to notice the first words Jesus spoke to the apostles: "peace be with you." Immediately he followed this up with breathing his spirit upon them and giving them the power to forgive sins. When we're struggling with the power of sin in our lives, we are not at peace. It is extremely significant that the first thing Jesus wants his apostles to do is to forgive sin. Sin, of course, gets in the way of our relationship with God, and Jesus came to help us be one with God. It is because we read about Jesus giving the apostles the power to forgive sin that this Sunday has been designated Divine Mercy Sunday. You don't have to wait for Divine Mercy Sunday every year to ask for God's mercy and forgiveness. That is always available to us when we approach Jesus asking for his mercy. So if you fall into

a sinful state, don't wait until next year this time to come for forgiveness. Get it done right away so you can enjoy the peace only God can give.

Today cannot go by without mentioning that our Holy Father, Pope Francis, is canonizing two holy men tomorrow: John XXIII who started an aggiornamento, a bringing the church up to date. Probably what we most are grateful for is that he allowed the Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular, in the language we are familiar with. Many people think John was chosen because of his age (77) and after the almost 20 year reign of Pius XII, it seemed to many that this old man would give the Church a chance to sit back and relax for a couple of years. He really surprised everyone. Actually, John was chosen for his positive qualities, his exemplary piety, his loyalty to Pius XII whom he did not always agree with, his fluent use of many languages, his talent for conciliation and his immense experience of diplomacy. He narrowly helped avert a war during the Cuban missile crisis He served the Church faithfully and wisely and with joy for about 4 ½ years.

The second man being canonized is John Paul II, noted for his long reign (26.5 years), the first non-Italian pope for 455 years, an athlete, a brilliant and prolific writer and teacher, a pope who liked to show his interest and concern to all parts of the world by his 104 "apostolic voyages." He liked giving recognition to hundreds of people (482) to be exact from all over the world for their holiness by naming them saints – holy people who have lived their faith in an outstanding way. He helped weaken the hold Communism held on the world. His dedication to God and to the Church is unquestionable.

Jesus said "blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." That is most of us including popes and saints. We don't have to see Jesus to be blessed or holy. We simply have to believe in him and live as he has taught us and as we saw in our first reading: that means adhering to the teachings of the apostles, caring for and helping one another, participation in the sacraments and prayer. Amen.