

## **Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**May 1, 2005**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke tells us about the growth and development of the early Church. Last week we heard about the institution of the diaconate. Seven men were chosen to care for the needs of the poor so that the Apostles could devote their time to teaching and preaching and prayer. Eventually, the first deacons did more than simply care for the poor. We have all heard of St. Stephen, the first martyr, who was put to death because he was such a convincing preacher. Today we hear about another one of the original deacons, Philip. He too became a powerful healer and preacher and brought many people to faith in Christ and baptized them into the community. Baptizing continues to be part of the ministry of a deacon.

### **HOMILY**

In today's gospel Jesus is talking with his Apostles at the Last Supper. He was trying to prepare them, as best he could, for the shock and trauma they would go through when he would be arrested and crucified. In last Sunday's gospel, we heard him tell them he was going to go to get a place ready for them in his Father's home and then he would come back to take them with him so that they would be together always. Now he tells them that even though he is leaving them for a time, he would not leave them orphans. First of all, he would give them another Paraclete, a Greek word which is hard to translate. It means basically someone who will support you, stand up for you or stand by your side to help you. Thus it is translated as "Advocate," "Comforter," "Intercessor," "Helper," "Mediator." Of course Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit. Yet, the Holy Spirit would not replace Jesus. Rather the Holy Spirit would help us to know that Jesus has not really left us at all. For Jesus tells us, "I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me..."

Jesus assures us the reason he will remain with us and the reason he is giving us the Holy Spirit is because of love. From the beginning he has loved us and he asks only for our love in return. In our gospel today he gives us a criterion to keep us from thinking love is just a matter of having warm, fuzzy feelings toward him. The test of true love for Jesus is to do his will, just as he has always done the will of the Father. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." He says it twice in today's short gospel. In other words, love is measured more by what we do than by what we feel! It's not that feelings are bad. Having warm, loving feelings toward God or toward others is wonderful. But love has to go beyond just feelings or it's just superficial. Anyone who's married knows that!

In his love, Jesus gives us another "Helper," Paraclete to be with us. And he himself remains with us too. We meet him in prayer, in gathering with other believers in his name, in the Scriptures, in helping others and in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. This weekend we have five of our children making their first Communion. This is a significant moment for them. And the reason it is significant is because it is a beginning, hopefully, the beginning of a deeper and deeper relationship with our Lord.

I have a story I would like to share with you to help connect the Eucharist with Christ's continuing presence. Seven years ago I was called to Hospice to be with one of our parishioners

who was dying. I took off in my car and as I pulled onto Spring Grove Avenue from Crawford someone, driving illegally, ran through the red light. I think their car was going 40 or 50 miles an hour. Their car hit my car right in the driver's side door. My car ended up turned around on the other side of the street and it was totaled. But I was not hurt. Before I left church to go to Hospice, I got a host from the tabernacle so I could take Communion to our parishioner. That host was in a small container in my left pocket between me and that speeding car. You can call it luck or providence. I believe in providence and I believe many of the things we call coincidences are simply incidences of God choosing to act anonymously. I believe God was literally my rock and my fortress that day acting as a wall of protection between me and a car coming at me 40 or 50 miles an hour. The Eucharist is Jesus, the Son of God, who remains with us and helps us on our way until we can be with him forever. May you always remain united with him and know his care and his love. Amen.

*Feast of the Ascension*  
*May 9, 2005*

Let me begin by wishing all of our mothers happy mothers day. A group of elementary school children were asked some important questions about mothers. I thought you might enjoy some of their answers. One question was "why did God make mothers?" "To help us out of there when we're getting born," one child replied. "She's the only one who knows where the Scotch tape is," a second child answered.

Asked what ingredients mothers are made of, another child replied, "God makes mothers out of clouds and angel hair and everything nice in the world and one dab of mean."

The children also were asked, "Why did God give you your mother and not some other mom?" "God knew she likes me a lot more than other people's moms like me." Replied a little boy.

"Because we're related," a little girl said.

They were asked, "What kind of little girl was your mom?" "They say she used to be nice," one child answered. Another child said, "I don't know because I wasn't there, but my guess would be that she was pretty bossy."

Asked what the difference is between moms and dads, one child said, "moms have magic. They make you feel better without medicine."

The children were asked, "If you could change one thing about your mom, what would it be?" "I would like for her to get rid of those invisible eyes in the back of her head," one child replied.

Said another: "She has this weird thing about keeping my room clean. I'd get rid of that." Still another child replied, "I'd make my mom smarter. Then she would know my sister did it, not me."

Thanks to all mothers for their dedication, their love, their hard work and even for the times when they have to discipline their children to teach them right from wrong. Along with honoring our mothers, we can't forget Mary, Jesus' mother and ours. Our statue of Mary is here because we just had May crowning on Friday.

And now we turn to a consideration of the Ascension of our Lord. St. Luke's description of the ascension, which we just heard from the Acts of the Apostles, always comes to mind whenever we think of the ascension. (Do not be confused if I refer to Luke and Matthew today, because

our gospel today was from Matthew, however, Luke wrote not only a gospel but the Acts of the Apostles as well.) Luke describes the ascension almost as if someone was there with a video camera capturing the whole event. But when Matthew, Mark, John and Paul refer to the ascension, they do so in somewhat different ways. These different ways of looking at the ascension make us realize we are dealing with a mystery, not a video tape of what took place. In some mysterious way Jesus made his return to the Father and was no longer with his apostles and disciples in a way that they could see. Just one example to illustrate this sense of mystery, St. Luke's version of the ascension has Jesus leaving from the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem. A tour guide will show you exactly where he was standing when he ascended. St. Matthew, on the other hand, seems to have Jesus meet his apostles for the last time in Galilee. Galilee was half pagan, implying that the message of the gospel is meant for all people.

Notice too, St. Matthew in today's gospel makes no mention of Jesus disappearing at all. Rather he focuses on two other aspects of the mystery of Jesus' return to the Father which I would like to point out.

The first is that the work of bringing the message of God's saving love to the world is now dependent on the apostles. Obviously it did not depend only on the apostles because Jesus' command to make disciples of *all* nations was a task far greater than any eleven people could accomplish.

The second point St. Matthew wants to stress are the words with which his gospel ends: "Behold, I am with you always..." Matthew stressed this same theme right at the beginning of his gospel when he told us, before Jesus was born, that his name would be Emmanuel, which means: "God is with us." We have to balance the picture Luke gives us of Jesus departing from us with these very important words that end St. Matthew's gospel: "I am with you always, even to the end of time."

In the ascension, one who was human like you and me has come to share fully in the divine life in his human flesh, and he reigns gloriously and eternally with God the Father. And he has gone there not to prove he is superior to all of us (which he is) but he has gone before us to prepare a place for us. We can't spend all our time though staring up to the heavens wondering where he's gone, or what he's doing or what heaven will be like for us. Occasionally it's good to contemplate the next life, it motivates us to live a good life, but we also need to hear what the angels said to the Apostles after Jesus ascended: "Why are you standing there, looking up at the sky?" The angels were saying in effect: "You have a job to do. There's not much time. Get going." We have a job to do, too. Remember, eleven people cannot bring the gospel message to the ends of the world as Jesus says must be done. We have to spread God's word and God's love. We have a special insert in today's bulletin describing how to invite people to know Christ. It's only through us that other people will find our Lord. Just don't forget, Jesus will be with us in our efforts. Amen.

*Pentecost*  
*May 15, 2005*

Pentecost is one of the three most important feasts of the Church year. We know Christmas is

one of the three. It's easy to get excited about the birth of a baby, especially when the baby is God's Son and his mother is the Virgin Mary. We know the feast of Jesus' resurrection is the most important feast of all, because if there were no resurrection, we would have no faith or hope at all. But Pentecost, the third most important feast, seems like another ordinary Sunday.

Let me give you a little history of Pentecost. It was not invented by the Church. The Jews were celebrating Pentecost 3000 years ago. The word itself means simply 50<sup>th</sup>, the 50<sup>th</sup> day after Passover. It was originally a harvest feast on which the first fruits were offered in gratitude to God. It was one of the three most important feasts for the Jews 3000 years ago. It later came to be celebrated as the anniversary of the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Jews were celebrating that feast when the Spirit came on Jesus' followers. It was 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. And so we still celebrate the coming of the Spirit 50 days after Easter.

Pentecost wasn't just a big event for the first followers of Jesus. It is important for us too because the Holy Spirit is important in our lives today. Symbols help us picture the Holy Spirit, symbols such as a dove, or tongues of fire. But like the wind, the Holy Spirit can be known by us only by what the Spirit does. We must not think that the Spirit wasn't around before Pentecost. The Spirit always was, because the Spirit is God, the third person of the Trinity. The Old Testament speaks frequently of God's "rûah," a word that sometimes means breath, sometimes wind, sometimes air, sometimes spirit. It was God's "rûah" that brought life and order out of chaos at the beginning of creation. In the New Testament, the work of the Spirit is more clearly defined. For example, at the annunciation Mary was told she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that same Holy Spirit shows up frequently during the life of Jesus. One of the things the Spirit did on Pentecost was to give the Apostles courage and a special gift of tongues, so they would be able to preach about Jesus. Thus we rightfully call Pentecost the birthday of the Church, because when they started to preach, many people were converted to Christ.

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost was just the beginning of the Spirit's work in the Church. And that same Spirit was given to each of us through the reception of the sacraments, especially Baptism and Confirmation. Even in the Eucharist the Spirit is at work consecrating the bread and wine we will receive as the body of Christ. Perhaps you will recognize these words from right before the consecration at Mass: "Let your Holy Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy." In a personal way the Spirit may give us courage and strength to witness to our faith by our words and by our lives as it did the apostles. But it may affect us in other ways too. For example, in Galatians (5,22ff) Paul tells us if we live by the Spirit, the Spirit will produce in us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control." I love too the description St. Paul gives us in I Corinthians of the greatest gift of the Spirit: "I may be able to speak the languages of men and even angels, but if have not love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell...Love is patient and kind, love is not jealous..." You are all familiar with the passage if you've gone to many weddings. This gift of love is not only to help us love one another, but it also helps us to love God. The Spirit makes us constantly aware of God's presence with us and God's love for us. The Spirit helps the Scriptures come alive for us because through them God speaks to us. And it is in this love for God and for each other that we do experience the joy and peace promised in Galatians.

If Pentecost is the third most important feast in the Church, how are we to celebrate it? What should today be for us? (1) It is a day to thank God for the Church, which led us to know Christ. (2) It is a day to thank God for the faith that allows each of us to say “Jesus is Lord,” for without the Holy Spirit we would not be able to believe. (3) It is a day to thank God for the gifts the Spirit gives us, especially the gift of love. (4) It is a day to thank God for sharing his Spirit with us, the Spirit whom we call “the Lord and giver of life” in the Creed which we are about to proclaim.

*Holy Trinity*  
*May 22, 2005*

**INTRODUCTION** - We hear about Moses in today’s first reading. Moses knew nothing of the Trinity. He lived about 3300 years ago at a time when all the nations around him believed in many gods. When God spoke to Moses, God told him there was only one God and that was the only God Moses and his people were to honor and serve. This is expressed in the first commandment. (I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt not have strange gods before me.) In our reading God gives his name to Moses. In the Hebrew bible, that name is spelled YHWH, but it was never pronounced, because the Jews were afraid of taking the sacred name in vain (as the second commandment forbade), so whenever YHWH came up in the text, they always substituted the title “Lord,” as we hear in today’s first reading. We often associate God in the Old Testament with fire and brimstone, but God’s self revelation to Moses is that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity, characteristics of God that appear also in today’s gospel.

**HOMILY** – For many, many centuries people thought our earth was the center of all creation. The sun, moon and planets were thought to revolve around the earth and many people regarded them as gods. It wasn’t until about 250 B.C. (about 1000 years after Moses), that some Greek philosophers proposed the idea that maybe the sun and not the earth was the center of the universe, but no one paid much attention to them. Of course, Christianity turned many people away from paganism and the worship of the stars and planets, but it wasn’t until Copernicus and Galileo in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it was actually proved that our earth was not the center of anything. The Church received a lot of bad press over this revolutionary idea of Galileo, but many in society and academia also thought Galileo was wrong. After all it is humbling to find out you are not the center of all creation when for years you thought you were. It is a humbling experience for many of us as we are growing up to find out that we are not the center of the universe.

Galileo made us aware, too, that not even our sun is the center of the universe, but it is just one star in one vast galaxy of stars called the Milky Way. Yet he had no idea how vast the universe is. We were further humbled 85 or 90 years ago to find out that those objects we thought were clouds of gas or dust within our galaxy were other galaxies just like our own. We now estimate that our sun is just an average sized star among 100 to 400 billion stars in our own Milky Way Galaxy. *However*, it is estimated that we are able to see over 100 billion galaxies through our telescopes. Who knows how many more there are that we cannot see!

I love to reflect on the magnitude and the mystery of creation for it gives me some hint of the

greatness and mystery of the Creator. When people claim they understand God or think they should be able to, they do not know God at all. Those who know God best are those who admit the great mystery that God is. God will always be too great for us to understand.

Today we celebrate the mystery of the Trinity, a mystery that takes us into the very heart of God. Besides the fact that the Trinity is a great mystery, it took theologians three or four centuries to arrive at the concept. Historically it developed in an effort to understand precisely who Jesus is. Was he God, just as the Father was God, or was he a being of the highest order, but created by the Father? A heretical teaching, now known as Arianism, said Jesus was a creature, not equal with the Father. Constantine and his successors got into the theological argument and bloody battles were waged over this issue. The Council of Nicaea in 325 officially defined that Jesus is as much God as the Father is God, yet there is only one God. You will notice when we recite the Nicene creed, which we do every Sunday, the bulk of the creed is devoted to Jesus.

You've heard of simple examples for the Trinity: St. Patrick compared the Trinity to a shamrock, St. John Damascene compared the Father to a spring of water, the Son to a river and the Holy Spirit to the sea. Another example he used was to think of the Father as the root of a tree, the Son as the branch and the Spirit as the fruit. Sometimes for children I hold three matches together and light them, and they join together to make a single flame of fire. These examples might help us a little, but it is impossible to take the mystery out of the Trinity.

We can approach the Trinity only prayerfully and through the guidance of the Spirit. Through the Scriptures and in the quiet of our hearts we come to know that God our creator loves us, sent his Son to save us and is always present with us. We can try to put our faith into theological concepts, and that's helpful in knowing our faith, but it's in the experience of prayer that we will know the joy of being loved by the one God who expresses both a divine unity and a three part diversity as Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.

***Body & Blood of Christ***  
***May 29, 2005***

Memorial Day is a testimony to the many women and men who have paid a great price for our freedom and for the blessings we enjoy. Memorial Day is also a testimony to our short memories because if we didn't have such occasions we could easily forget. And we don't want to do that. I think one of the worst things we can do as an individual and as a nation is to take our blessings for granted.

This too is one reason Jesus gave us the Mass and told us "Do this in memory of me." Today at Mass we celebrate the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. As always at Mass we remember all that Jesus did for us. However, our feast informs us that we do more than simply remember what Jesus did. At Mass we are mystically connected with the past and Christ is really present, not like he was 2000 years ago teaching and healing in Israel, but he is with us in his risen form. In his risen form we are not able to see him with our eyes. We can only know him by faith, but when we enter into the next life our spirit will know him even as he knows us now.

Because today's mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ is based on faith, our only evidence is what Jesus told us. For this is what "faith" is, to accept something as true because of what

someone told us. We cannot know it by any of our other senses, only by our sense of hearing. We hear Jesus say in today's gospel: "the bread that I will give is my flesh..." And we hear his words at the Last Supper every time we say Mass: "This is my body, this is my blood." And because we believe Jesus spoke truth and spoke with unique power, we believe what he said.

There are many ways to approach today's mystery. One of my favorite ways is to think of it in terms of energy. Think of an acorn and an acorn sized stone. They might look similar, but one is full of life ready to break out and grow into a tree, and the other will never do anything. One has the energy of life within it and the other does not. We look at the host. It doesn't look any different after the consecration than it did before, but a whole new energy replaced what was there before: a divine energy that promises: "Whoever eats this bread will live forever." Another example can be different types of food. You can eat healthy food and it will nourish you and keep you healthy. You can eat junk food and eventually your health will suffer. Healthy food has vitamins and nutrients in it. Our body needs these things to stay healthy. I've never seen a vitamin. I've seen lots of vitamin pills and I take my share of them, but to see what an actual vitamin looks like, I guess I would need some kind of molecular microscope. But I know they're in certain foods and they're important. We can spend our lives feeding our mind and heart and spirit with junk, which like junk food is often more tempting, or we can feed ourselves with healthy things that require a little more discipline to choose. Jesus is giving us something healthy, but it requires a little more discipline than laying in bed on Sunday morning or watching something on TV or going to some sporting event.

One of the more recent statistics I've seen reports that a very high percent of young people believe in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, but a much lower percent say they believe they can be a good Catholic without attending Mass every Sunday. We all know we should eat healthy food, but somehow we think even if we don't, we'll still stay healthy. And I think it's the same with the Eucharist.

I started thinking why people don't come to Church, even though they say they believe in the Eucharist. They don't like the sermons, they don't like the music, they don't like what some other priests have done, they don't like some of the people they worship with, they don't like the Church's rules, or, and perhaps this is the biggest reason, there is laziness. Remember it's one of the seven capital sins. It is not sinful because a person is too lazy to cut the grass or clean the house, but, to quote the old catechism: the sin lies in one's "distaste for spiritual things because their attainment requires much labor."

The third commandment requires us to give God our worship and praise each week, if only for an hour. The Church specifies this is the proper and perfect way to do it, to respond to our Lord's invitation to come to his table: "Do this in memory of me." If we want any proof that Jesus really wants us to believe in his real presence in the Eucharist, today's gospel spells it out as clearly as possible. If we were to read on in John's gospel, we would see that after Jesus said what he did, his listeners started drifting away. They said he was crazy. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" He didn't call them back and say "you misunderstood me," or "you're taking me literally and I was speaking symbolically." Instead he turned to the apostles and asked them "will you leave me too?" It is a question for us also: "Will you leave me too?"

In today's feast the Church reminds us of the great gift Christ has given us, himself. What greater gift of love can a person give than their own selves? May we not take it for granted!