

INTRODUCTION

The gift of sight is a great gift. But seeing with our physical eyes is only part of being able to see. Dogs and cats, birds and squirrels may see the same things we do, maybe even better, but knowing how to interpret and understand what we see is the other important part of seeing.

Some things our eyes cannot see at all, but can only be seen by our mind and heart. In our first reading we hear how God revealed to the great prophet Samuel who would be the best person to rule over God's people. The story takes us back over 1000 years before Christ. This was during the reign of King Saul who was the first king of Israel. King Saul had lost God's favor through disobedience and God was ready to replace him. God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to choose a new king from among the sons of Jesse. As we hear, Samuel was impressed with the oldest son. To the eyes of any observer, the oldest son looked in every way the part of a king, but that was not the way God saw things. Jesse's other sons, as physically appealing as they were, were not chosen. No one even considered the youngest son as a possibility, but he ended up being the one God wanted for the job. He turned out to be the greatest king Israel ever had, king David. David's famous psalm, which follows, praises God for leading us when we cannot see where we are going.

HOMILY

Physical blindness is indeed a handicap. But blindness in our minds and hearts is a handicap as well and sometimes even a worse one than physical blindness. For example, a young lady I once knew was involved in a very unhealthy relationship. She would not see that the guy she was so attached to was only using her and abusing her. So she kept seeing him and she continued to suffer greatly because of his abuse. Another example is addiction. Often an addicted person goes through life not seeing they are addicted. "I don't have a problem," they say. "I have everything under control. I can stop any time I want." It's not until they see they have a problem that they will do anything about it and, until

they do, they will continue to cause pain for themselves and those who love them. A lot of depressed people do not see how their self-hatred and negative thinking patterns are a source of so much suffering for themselves. One of the functions of a good counselor or psychologist is to help people see things differently.

The Jewish leaders had eyes to see with but inwardly they were blind. They would not see the beauty and power and love of God at work in Jesus. They had their mind made up about Jesus, that he was no good. And their blindness was not involuntary, but deliberate. The Lord can heal us of our blind spots, but he cannot make us open our eyes if we refuse to. And so Jesus says, “if you were blind there would be no sin in that. ‘But we see,’ you say, and your sin remains.” That is a frightening statement: “your sin remains!” Their kind of blindness refuses healing. Could Jesus mean when he said “your sin remains” that for all eternity they would never see the beauty and love and glory of God which will be our source of eternal happiness? It’s not for us to judge anyone else, of course. But before we rush to condemn the Jewish leaders, we need to look to our own blind spots and ways we rationalize our failure to serve the Lord and to open our hearts more fully to him. That’s why we have Lent, to try to look at ourselves honestly and see a little more clearly how we can love him and love others more completely. If your good intentions at the beginning of Lent have gone by the wayside, or if you haven’t even begun to do anything special for Lent, it’s not too late to start over. We have three more weeks before Easter.

One last thought. Jesus healed the man with the simple, common elements of mud and water. He does the same with us, giving us his light and grace through the simple, common elements of water in baptism and bread and wine in the Eucharist. This is something our eyes are unable to see, but which we can see only through faith.

5th Sunday in Lent – A Cycle

March 13, 2005

INTRODUCTION: The first reading comes from about 600 years before

Christ during the Babylonian exile. The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a field covered with dry bones. The field of dry bones represented God's people and their nation, destroyed by the Babylonians. In his vision Ezekiel saw God put these bones together, cover them with flesh and breathe life into them. It was a prophecy that God would bring his exiled people back to their homes and their land. Today's first reading summarizes this vision and the prophecy. The reading prepares us for the gospel about Jesus raising his friend Lazarus from the dead.

HOMILY: Lazarus' tomb is not one of the major tourist attractions in the Holy Land. It is located atop the Mount of Olives. The tomb was cut into the soft limestone rock and when the door is open, one enters the tomb by descending down a flight of very uneven steps, which are dimly lit by a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The stairs lead to a small room measuring 10 feet by 10 feet. This would be where the family would gather for final words and prayers with their deceased loved one. Then the deceased person's body would be taken into an adjoining room, even smaller and their body would be placed in a niche cut into the wall of this small room. There would be enough niches carved into the walls of this very small room for many family members. I probably wouldn't even have visited Lazarus' tomb when I was in the Holy Land, except for the fact that we stayed several weeks in Bethany and Lazarus' tomb was just a short walk from where we were staying. I was certainly impressed with Bethlehem and Galilee and Calvary and the tomb of Jesus and other important places like Mt. Sinai which we climbed, but for me, personally, the tomb of Lazarus was the place where I felt most overwhelmingly the power and awesomeness of our Lord. There were only one or two other people at Lazarus' tomb when I visited there and when I stood in that small, empty, dimly lit room, I thought there's only one person who has the power to make the tombs empty. It was such a moving experience that even after several years I could hardly talk about it.

Jesus said to Martha: "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." Who could make such a statement: "everyone who lives and believes in me will never die?" They would either have to be someone so unique and special, the likes of which this world has never known, or they would have to be someone with a very severe case of delusions of grandeur.

From everything else we know about Jesus, he was totally sane and in touch with reality. More than that he was someone with special wisdom and special powers. He did not just ask for Martha's faith, "do you believe this?" but he did more, he showed he had power even over death itself. Who else has the power to make the tombs empty? The Lord asks us today as he asked Martha: "Do you believe this?" "Do you believe that everyone who lives and believes in me will never die?" What a comfort this is when we lose a loved one whom we know has lived and died in God's grace.

But Jesus' words are not limited to the experience of death. We all experience many losses in life, little deaths, things that we have to grieve for. It could be our health, our job, our security or the loss of something that meant a lot to us. We have to trust somehow that even in these sufferings God can bring life out of death. This is what is meant by the Easter mystery, or the Paschal mystery. As St. Paul tells us: "We know that all things work for good for those who love God." Rom 8,28.

One thing that has been very disturbing this week is that three priests have been suspended. Many people know Fr. Mike from the hospital. Fr. Vincent is my classmate from the seminary and he and I were assigned together to Guardian Angels when we were first ordained and he is one of the most dedicated priests I know. The Archbishop has taken a lot of heat for suspending them. But I feel the Archbishop had little choice in the matter. Apparently the Archbishop and his board investigated all of these cases a few years ago and found them without substance. But when the Archbishop set up a fund to compensate victims of child abuse by clergy, which I think was a wise and compassionate move, the committee of two justices and a lawyer paid unspecified compensation to people claiming to have been abused by those three priests. When payments were made, the Archbishop considered that the judgment of those who administered the fund provided grounds of at least some level of suspicion. Ever since the bishops drew up their document for child protection a few years ago stressing "zero tolerance," any suspicion of misbehavior calls for a suspension. This was all printed in the Enquirer Thursday morning, along with the charges against the priests and I thought the reporting was pretty fair and objective. I can't say the same for some of the radio commentary I've heard. The next step is for the Archdiocesan Lay Review Board to review the cases and, if they feel the charges against any of

the priests are substantiated, then the case will go to Rome for a final determination. This is the procedure that has to be followed. I am sure those who know any of these priests are saddened by it. I think it's another example when our faith is being tested, when we have to believe that God can bring good out of evil, life out of death. As the Archbishop wrote when he sent us a communication about all of this: "The Lord is in all this somewhere. We stand in the shadow of the cross, to be sure, but we are certain that resurrection lies ahead." And he encourages us to pray for one another.

Passion Sunday – A Cycle

March 20, 2005

Matthew Kelly spoke at our Catholic Men's Conference last Saturday. He told a story which can be found in his book: *Rediscovering Catholicism*. It goes like this: Imagine that you're driving home next Monday with the radio on and you hear on the news that several people have in India have died of a strange flu. You don't think much about it, but later on in the week you see on TV that now it's not just several people, but 30,000 people who have died of this strange disease. People are heading there from the disease center in Atlanta because this type of flu has never been seen before. By the following Monday, it's not just in India, but in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. The news reports that France has closed its borders to all flights from areas where this mystery disease has been detected. But before the day ends, there is a news release that a man is dying in a Paris hospital of this mysterious flu. It has arrived in Europe. As best the medical people can tell, you have it for a week before you even know it, then you have four days of unbelievably painful symptoms, then you die. Tuesday morning England closes its borders but it's too late. By Tuesday evening the President of the United States announces that due to this epidemic all flights to and from Europe and Asia have been cancelled until a cure for this disease is found. Panic strikes. The fear that it will come to the United States becomes a reality by Wednesday night when the news reports on two women in a hospital in New York who are dying of this mysterious disease.

Health personnel are working around the clock looking for an antidote. Nothing is working. California, Oregon, Arizona, Florida, Massachusetts report cases. Thursday, the news comes out. The code has been broken. A cure can be found. It's going to take the blood of someone who hasn't been infected. So an alert goes out, asking all citizens to report to a local hospital to have their blood analyzed. You go with your spouse and young son on Friday and there is a long line. Doctors and nurses are busy pricking fingers and labeling samples and asking people to wait until their blood is analyzed. You stand around waiting, wondering if this is the end of the world. Suddenly a young man comes running out of the hospital screaming. He's yelling a name and waving a clipboard. It's your son he's calling. They take your son and tell you they believe his blood is clean and pure. They want to check again. You anxiously wait longer and before long doctors and nurses come out of the lab, crying and laughing at the same time. It's the first time you've seen anyone laugh in a week. An older doctor comes up to you to tell you "your son's blood is perfect. It's clean and pure and they can make the antidote from it." The word spreads. People are praying and laughing and crying and praising God. The doctor approaches you again and asks you to sign a consent form for blood to be taken from your son. You look closely at the form and find that the box identifying the number of pints needed is empty. You ask how many pints of blood they will need. That's when the doctor's smile fades. He says we didn't expect we would have to take blood from a little child. We will need it all. But you protest. "He's my only child." The doctor insists "we must hurry. People all over the world are dying. Please sign." You get to spend a few minutes with your son to assure him of your love and then the doctor interrupts, "I'm sorry, we have to get started." Your son wants to know why you are leaving him alone. The medical staff do their thing. Your son dies, but a medicine is created and people are beginning to recover from the mysterious flu. Next week there is a memorial ceremony to honor your son. There are some people sleeping through it, some don't bother to come, some complain it's boring. You want to cry out "Excuse me! My son died for you! Don't you even care? Does it mean nothing to you?" I wonder if

God ever feels like crying out “My son died for you! Does it mean nothing? Don’t you know how much I care?”

Good Friday

March 25, 2005

He was born and grew up in an obscure village, the child of ordinary people. He worked as a carpenter and an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book, never held an office, never had a wife or children, nor owned a house. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. When he was only thirty-three his enemies had him nailed to a cross. His executioners gambled for his clothing. He was laid in a borrowed grave. After nineteen centuries he is the central figure of the human race. All the kings that ever reigned, all the armies that ever marched have not affected the human race as much as that one solitary life.

So many times I am asked why Christ died as he did? For one thing, everything would be different. I’m sure when many of us have read history we’ve asked ourselves what would things be like if a certain event hadn’t happened. What if Columbus had not been so determined to sail to the West Indies? Or what if the British had crushed the revolution of their thirteen colonies here in the new world in the late 1700’s? Or what if the South had won the Civil War in 1864? Or what if Mr. and Mrs. Edison had decided to stop having children after their sixth one? Thomas Alva Edison, who was their seventh child, would not have been born. It’s interesting to speculate how our lives would have been different if one person or one event had not been. But what about Jesus? What if he hadn’t died as he did?

Maybe being divine he would have been taken up directly into heaven without having to die. If, like Elijah, he was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot, some obscure Jewish history book might have mentioned him, but would that gain him a great following? Or, since Jesus was also human like us in every way except sin, he may have died a natural death, which would have resulted in his soon being forgotten after all his

followers died. Think about it. Do you suppose, in either case, his followers would have risked their lives to go out preaching about him or would anyone have taken the time to write down what he said or did? Would any of us have even heard about him?

Perhaps we would still be worshipping Jupiter and Mars and Venus, or sacrificing our children to Baal or Moloch. In pagan mythology, humans were not loved by the gods. Humans were only useful to the gods for the sacrifices and worship they offered. Would we have ever heard the message of God's love and mercy? Or perhaps some-where along the line, our ancestors might have recognized the superiority of the Jewish faith over paganism and we would all be observing Jewish traditions, abstaining from pork and making sure our infant boys were circumcised. Or maybe we all would have no spiritual anchor, wondering what life is all about, wondering if there is any kind of life after we die, wondering how God or the gods want us to serve him or her or them?

I strongly suspect that if Jesus did not die as he did and rise again, at least a billion people in today's world would be thinking, praying, acting, living differently than they are now, and with many people living life differently, everyone else would be affected.

When I am asked why did Jesus have to die as he did, one answer that can be given is that we probably would never have known about him if he hadn't. That's far from a complete answer to the question, though. Theologians have struggled with this question for centuries and they have come up with many different answers. So I would like to reflect on just a couple of other ways to look at the passion of Jesus.

We can't just look at his death in isolation from the rest of his life. His whole life was dedicated to teaching God's ways and assuring us of God's love. He came to tell us God has wonderful plans for us if we believe in him and follow him. His death was the culmination of a life of love. His teachings threatened the powerful people of his day. They were so threatened by him that they felt they had to kill him. However, Jesus loved his Father enough to stay with the job he had been given, to preach the truth. And he loved the people enough to keep teaching them, no matter what the

consequences might be. He could have easily given up preaching, he could have gone into hiding, he could have gotten twelve legions of angels to give him security. But if he had done anything other than be faithful to his mission, he would have betrayed the unfailing and never-ending love he proclaimed.

We could talk for hours, and still not exhaust the meaning and significance of Jesus' passion. That's why we commemorate it every week, every day even! By his death he taught us how to be patient in suffering, and to hope in the face of defeat. He taught us that goodness can overcome evil and sin, and that death does not have the last word. And in his death and resurrection he gave us a new way to pray. The night before he died he gave us the greatest prayer there is - the Eucharist. It is a prayer that unites us with him in his saving death and resurrection, and it is a prayer that shows us the perfection of faithfulness and love and gives us the help to model our lives on it.

We've all bought things that we have to assemble ourselves. Someone manufactured the item, and packed it in a box and then left it to us to put together. Jesus has done everything possible to make eternal life available to us. But we have to do the job of incorporating Jesus' saving work into our own lives. We can't leave it in the box and expect it to work. We have to live it each day. Today we honor Jesus' sacrifice and love. We pray we will do what we need to do to make it a part of our lives.

Easter

March 27, 2005

A family, who seldom came to church, showed up one Easter Sunday. One of the children, after getting settled in the pew, looked around and asked in a fairly audible voice, "where are the Christmas trees that were here the last time?" After the father's face turned a little red, one of his other children commented, "Jesus did everything on holidays, didn't he?"

A pastor was talking to a group of young people about the high cost of dying. "The average cost to pay for a funeral, a casket and a burial plot today runs somewhere in the neighborhood of \$8000. Jesus was so unconcerned about his own funeral that he had to use a borrowed tomb." A teenager raised her

hand and said, “But Jesus only needed it for three days!”

Indeed! And that tomb has been held in highest regard and honor ever since. There is no indication that Joseph of Arimathea, who allowed Jesus to be buried in his own tomb, ever finished it or used it for himself or his family, no doubt because of the respect and devotion Jesus’ followers had toward it. Even during a period of almost two hundred years when it was buried under a temple that the Roman Emperor Hadrian had built in honor of Venus, Christians always knew exactly where it was. When Constantine was converted to Christianity and wanted to build a church over Jesus’ tomb, Christians told him where it could be found. Constantine’s church was the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The church underwent immense damage and much repair in the course of 17 centuries, but the main part of the church is still there, protecting Jesus’ tomb along with the hill of Calvary, which is only a little more than one hundred feet away. The empty tomb is one of the proofs we have for the resurrection.

[St. John also tells us about the cloths that covered Jesus’ body. It might seem to most of us to be a useless detail, but it is an important one. Do you remember the gospel from two weeks ago that talked about the raising of Lazarus? The gospel told us Lazarus came out of the tomb still wrapped in his burial cloth. He had to be freed from them. John is telling us in a subtle way that since Jesus’ body was gone, but the burial clothes remained behind, Jesus had already been unbound from the powers of death.]

There is another proof for the resurrection; that is, the gospels themselves. We tend to think that we learn about the resurrection from the gospels. That is true. But we seldom think that there would have been **no** gospels if there had been no resurrection. Without the resurrection, it’s hardly possible the followers of Jesus would have put their lives on the line, for no material gain, to proclaim that Jesus had risen if it weren’t true. They were witnesses to the resurrection, a witness that cost them their lives, and the gospels are the record of what they proclaimed.

There is one story in the gospel itself I would like to reflect on. It’s one I meditate on every time I pray the rosary. It’s the fifth joyful mystery, the finding of Jesus in the temple. Did you ever notice the similarity between the

resurrection and the story of Mary and Joseph losing Jesus in the Temple when Jesus was twelve? St. Luke tells us the story. Joseph and Mary and Jesus made the three or four day trip to the Temple for Passover every year. At the Temple there were separate sections for the men and for the women. Normally children would be with their mothers, but when a boy was twelve, as Jesus was on this particular occasion, he could be with either his father or his mother. That is where the problem arose. Apparently Jesus wandered off and both parents thought Jesus was with the opposite parent. When they discovered he was missing, they searched for three days before they found him. You, who are parents, know what panic you feel when you lose track of one of your children even for a short time. Imagine what Joseph and Mary felt for three days. Those “three days” connect the story of Joseph and Mary losing Jesus with the resurrection. After Jesus was buried, surely his mother Mary and his followers felt they had lost him forever. However, after three days he was with them again, but not in the same way as before. He was with them now in a new way, in a new kind of life, a life that is beyond our everyday experience, a life that is not bound by time or place or even doors and walls, a life beyond suffering, a life that is abundant and eternal. A life he offers to each of us who remain united with him.

In the story about Mary and Joseph losing Jesus in the Temple, Mary asked Jesus “why did you do this to us?” Jesus answered her simply as if to say: “Well, duh...didn’t you know where I would be?” “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” This was an answer not just for Mary and Joseph but for us too. Would we like to have a closer relationship with Jesus? Are there times we wonder where he is in our lives? Now that he is risen we do not see him with our bodily eyes, but Jesus tells us how we can find him, where we can meet him, how we can be assured he is still with us. He’s right here, in God’s house. This is where I find him each day and where he teaches me how to find him also in other places and in other people. As we gather in the Father’s house today, may we know his risen presence with us and may we share with him the new life he offers us here. Amen.