

Fifth Sunday of Easter - C Cycle

May 2, 2010

INTRODUCTION (Acts 14, 21-27; Rev. 21, 1-5a; John 13, 31-33a,34-45)

Last Sunday we heard a little bit about Paul's first missionary journey. He led many Jews and Pagans to faith in Jesus as the Messiah, while at the same time arousing much opposition. In today's first reading we are still with Paul as he makes his return trip back to the Christian Community in Syria which had originally inspired and sponsored his mission. In spite of the harsh treatment he had previously received from his opponents in those places, he is not afraid to revisit cities where he had already preached. The name Antioch could confuse us for there were two cities named Antioch. The first mention of Antioch was a town in central Turkey where a mob of unbelievers ran Paul out of town. The second Antioch (the place where his missionary journey began) was on the east coast of Syria and it was one of the four largest cities in the Roman Empire. Paul was returning there to report on the successes and challenges of his mission. He acknowledged that at times it wasn't easy: "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God."

HOMILY

After giving her catechism class a very thorough lesson on the Ten Commandments, the teacher quizzed her students. "What is the First Commandment?" she asked. She called on a boy who was staring into space. She knew he hadn't been paying attention to the lesson. The boy thought a bit and answered: "The First Commandment was when Eve told Adam to eat the apple." (from Preaching Resources, May 2, 2010, published by Celebration Publications, Kansas City, Mo.)

This one comes from Reader's Digest, May, 2010, pg 176. A lady asked her friend if she attended Church. Her friend just shook her head. "I haven't gone in a long time. I'm sure I'm a lost soul anyway. I've probably already broken all seven commandments."

I'll say more about commandments in a moment, but there is something I want to say first. Has it ever happened that you, as it has to me, to tell a joke and forget the punch line or try to tell a story and couldn't remember the ending? Without the punch line or a good ending to a story the hearers are left wondering, "What's that all about?" We are coming to the end of the book of Revelation where we find the main point of this Book. Sure, the Book of Revelation predicts war and suffering and turmoil - often in symbolic ways that are very frightening. The study of history confirms the dire predictions of this Book. Turmoil and suffering are part of life in this world. When Paul says in the second reading that we have to undergo many hardships in order to enter God's kingdom, is he's saying that we will never face hardship if we choose not to follow Jesus? Of course not. It's just that following Jesus has its own unique set of difficulties. I believe that those who do not have Jesus in their lives suffer even greater difficulties because they do not share his wisdom and experience his love. Turmoil and suffering, which touch every person's life are not the main point of the Book of Revelation. The main point of Revelation is ictory, victory for those who have faithfully followed Christ. Our second reading today begins this

last part of Revelation. It describes, as best it can and in a symbolic way, the new heavens and new earth that God is creating.

One avenue that leads to that new work of God's creation is the new commandment he gives us, "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another." You might wonder what's new about this? Here's what's new: we who are human are commanded to love in a divine way; we are to love like the Son of God has loved us. How can we do something that is so far above our nature? It would be like teaching a worm to recite Shakespeare. It seems impossible. Jesus would not ask the impossible of us. We can love with a divine love only when we have God in our hearts helping us to love in that way. The consequence of that kind of love in us will be that we will share in God's peace and God's joy, a peace like the world cannot give and a joy that is God's own. "I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete." (John 15,11) For all this to happen, it follows that we need to stay connected with Christ and allow him to live in us. He does so in a powerful and unique way through the Eucharist we now celebrate. Amen.

Sixth Sunday of Easter - C Cycle

May 9, 2010

INTRODUCTION - (Acts 15, 1-2.22-29; Revelation 21, 10-14.22-23; John 14, 23-29) The Apostles and all who first came to believe in Jesus were Jewish. They did not see themselves as part of a new religion; thus they continued to follow their Jewish laws, customs, rituals and traditions. However, there were problems when Gentiles started to believe in Jesus. Many Jews who believed in Jesus insisted that Gentiles had to adopt Jewish ways if they wanted to consider themselves followers of Jesus. So when our first reading speaks of circumcision, it's really talking about all the rules and customs the Jews were bound to follow. This conflict arose especially in Antioch, in Syria, because it was a large city and racially quite diverse. To solve the problem, the leaders of the Church at Antioch, including St. Paul, went to Jerusalem to meet with some of the other Apostles. Their decision was sent back to Antioch. It was a major decision affecting how the Church would grow, including whether we would have faith in Christ today and how we would be living it. Notice how the Apostles introduced their decision: "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit, and ours too..." This has always been the belief of the Church whenever the bishops gather in council together with the Holy Father that the Church is being guided by the Holy Spirit. It is an important concept especially today when so many people think they can make up their own rules and do not need the Church to tell them what's right or wrong.

HOMILY - Happy Mothers' Day. I'll start with a little joke, then a reflection on mothers, before my thoughts on today's readings. A little girl, when asked her name, would always tell people "I'm Mr. Brown's daughter." One day her mother told her, "Don't say to people you're 'Mr. Brown's daughter.' Tell them 'I'm Susan Brown.'" One Sunday morning, as the new pastor was getting acquainted with his parishioners, he asked the little girl: "Aren't you Mr. Brown's daughter?" The

little girl answered, "I thought I was, but my mom tells me I'm not." (From The Joyful Noiseletter, May, 2004) When children quote us, sometimes it can be embarrassing - one of the joys and challenges of raising children.

Reflection: "God gave the world stars and there was beauty. God gave the world sun and there was warmth. God gave the world rain and there was life. God gave the world mothers and there was love." (From The Joyful Noiseletter, May, 2008)

One more little piece of information: I read recently that a middle-income family can expect to spend \$291,570 to raise a child born in 2008 to adulthood. The estimate covers food, shelter, and other necessities for an infant until age 18, but does not include the cost of childbirth or college. (From Leadership Network Advance 9/22/09) Parents make quite an investment in choosing to be a parent, and especially it is a mind-boggling investment if one parent has to go it alone - usually the mother. We thank our mothers today (and those who have the role of mothers) for their dedication and the many, many sacrifices they make in their vocation.

I've been talking about the Book of Revelation for the last several weeks. Since we have reached the climax of the Book, it would be negligent of me not to say anything about it today. John, the author of the Book, has a vision of heaven, the source of hope for a people who were suffering for their belief in Christ. Today's reading gives us just a hint of what heaven will be like - expressed symbolically as the new and eternal Jerusalem. The author has to use symbols because it will be so much a "new heaven and a new earth" that there's no way we could ever grasp what it might be like while we are still part of this world.

Today's reading tells us the new Jerusalem has a massive, high wall around it. At one time all large cities were encircled by walls for security from wild animals and hostile neighbors. In another part of Revelations, we are told these walls were 1500 miles high, and each of the four walls were 1500 miles in length thus forming a perfect cube. The wall was over 200 feet thick. Does that speak security to you? The foundation stones for the wall were various gems on which the names of the twelve apostles were written, showing the city is founded on the apostles. Notice there are twelve gates. The gates of the city, open in all four directions, indicate that God's kingdom is open to all people. The gates are each made of a single pearl (thus the term, "pearly gates"). The gates have inscribed on them the names of the twelve tribes of Israel indicating the Old Testament roots of our faith. The dimensions of the city would be about half the size of the United States! That's some city. The size, which for the people of those days must have seemed infinite, symbolizes the multitude of people that will fill God's kingdom. The city was beautiful beyond belief. The city is without a temple which says we will experience God directly. No temple will be needed. It needs no light for its source of light is God and Jesus, God's victorious Son, who is the fullness of light. Much more is said about heaven in the last two chapters of the book. It is where we all hope to be some day.

Today's gospel gives us a map, as it were, to direct us to this new creation God is preparing for those who love him. Jesus tells us, "whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." What this means is if we

want to some day dwell in the new and eternal Jerusalem, it has to begin in this world with God's dwelling in us. That union between God and ourselves will constitute the true joy of heaven. Jesus tells us today, having God dwell in us involves keeping Jesus' word. Jesus goes on to explain the special help we will have to enable us to keep his word. "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you." The word "teach" really jumped out at me. To their credit, I've met so many people who want to be close to God and they want to experience God, but they want it almost instantaneously. Just by saying a prayer or receiving a sacrament, they want God to somehow magically transform them. They're looking for a short cut to help them avoid all the effort of learning and growing into what God wants of us. They want it all right now - heaven and all the wonderful feeling of knowing God intimately. But this word "teach" tells us something else. Growing in knowing and loving God, growing in loving others in a more unselfish way, growing in the ability to pray, growing in holiness takes patience and time and effort. It's an effort that brings many rewards, but it's not automatic and not without challenges. The Holy Spirit will teach us if we want to learn, if we don't give up too soon. God dwelling in us and our dwelling with him is the true joy that awaits us.

Feast of the Ascension - C Cycle

May 16, 2010

INTRODUCTION: (Acts 1,1-11; Ephesians 1, 17-23; Luke 24, 40-53) St. Luke gave us two books in the New Testament: The Acts of the Apostles and, of course, his gospel. We hear from both of them today. The gospel ends with the ascension and the Acts of the Apostles begins with the ascension. You'll notice when you hear the first reading from the Acts, he refers to his gospel as his "first book." It is interesting how he treats the ascension in each of these two books. In the Acts he said Jesus ascended 40 days after Easter, but in his gospel he describes how Jesus appeared to his apostles Easter Sunday night, spoke with them, ate with them and then, that very night, he led them out to Bethany where he ascended into heaven. It seems as if Jesus' physical departure from the apostles and his return to the Father was not a one-time dramatic event. It was more like a process. One way of thinking of the 40-day period is that after the resurrection Jesus appeared rather frequently to the apostles. Luke's description of the ascension 40 days after Easter seems to mark the end of those frequent appearances. After that Jesus would be present to his followers invisibly through the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, and the Church. St. Luke described this invisible presence throughout the Acts of the Apostles.

HOMILY: A woman, who never came to Church except on Easter, came up to the pastor to complain: "I can't believe it! Every time I come here all they sing is 'Jesus Christ is Risen Today.'" (From The Joyful Noiseletter, April, 2001) We're not singing it today but it would be just as appropriate as if it were Easter because the ascension of Jesus is a major part of the mystery of his resurrection.

We say in our profession of faith each week that Jesus "ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." This image is an extremely important image in the Scriptures. Maybe it doesn't hit us as powerfully as it did the early Christians because we just take it for granted that that's where Jesus would be, at God's right hand. St. John tells us at the beginning of his gospel: "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Seated at the right hand of God is where he was before he came to earth as a human being and now he is once again enthroned in his proper place. For those who do not have the faith that we have, faith in the Trinity and in the Incarnation, the idea of Jesus seated at God's right hand would have been blasphemous. That was exactly the response of the high priest when Jesus was on trial and Jesus said to the high priest, "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power" (a name they used for God since out of reverence the Jews did not speak God's name). (Mt. 26,64) The high priest cried out, "He has blasphemed." Let's think of what Jesus was saying for a moment. What if I said, "when you get to heaven you will see all the angels and saints and then you are going to see me seated with God at his right hand." You would rightly think that I was seriously deluded or greatly arrogant. This image expressed for Jesus' followers his everlasting greatness, and kingship and power and yes, his divinity. An amazing thought: a human being, just like us except without sin, is seated in the highest heaven, sharing in God's power and glory. When one of the first deacons, St. Stephen, was martyred he died with these words on his lips, "Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7,56) Paul expresses this belief with great emphasis in today's second reading - that God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every power, every creature that has existed or could exist. All things are beneath his feet and he is head over everything. (Eph. 1, 17-23)

Peter, in his first sermon after Pentecost, proclaimed a Jesus who was exalted at the right hand of God. (Acts 2,33) Paul repeats the image a number of times in his letters and so does the Letter to the Hebrews. We picture the ascension pretty much the way it is described in the Acts of the Apostles with Jesus disappearing behind a cloud, no more to be seen by mortal human beings, except by an occasional saint. Even though he is now hidden from our sight, the Scriptures want us to see him sharing God's power and glory. To know that our God, who has raised the human body of Jesus from the dead and taken him to sit at his right hand, has given him to the Church, to us, to be our salvation and to lead us to glory.

St. Luke gives us two ways of looking at the ascension. In our first reading the Apostles are looking longingly into the sky as Jesus disappears behind the clouds. In the gospel the Apostles return to Jerusalem with joy, knowing that their crucified Jesus now lived. In both accounts of the ascension they are told they would receive the Holy Spirit from Jesus, giving them the power to witness to the world the miracle of the resurrection. We can look at the ascension with longing or with joy, but either way we are left with a job to do, to witness to our faith in the risen and glorified Lord in whatever way we can.

Vigil of Pentecost - C Cycle

May 22, 2010

I hope you have the impression that today is a very special feast. We have a special Vigil Mass with its own readings and prayers. Christmas, Easter, the birth of John the Baptist, and the feast of the Assumption are the only other feasts that have a special Vigil Mass. There is a wider assortment of readings we can choose from than there is on an ordinary Sunday. I asked parishioners to wear the color red in honor of the Holy Spirit. If you were to go to Mass tomorrow, you would also see there is a sequence. The only other feast that has a sequence that is a required part of the liturgy is Easter. Today is the third most important feast in the Church year, the feast that celebrates the completion of Jesus' saving work with his sending of the Holy Spirit.

Our first reading today is one of my favorites. At the time of Ezekiel (600 BC), God's people did not have any idea of individual or personal resurrection. Ezekiel, in his vision of a field of dry bones, is referring to the nation of Israel that was at that time in Exile in Babylon. They had given up hope of ever returning home or of ever being a nation again. They thought their race and nation were dead. Ezekiel is telling them God would bring them back from exile and raise them up. I should also add, no one knew about the Trinity at that time in history. When Ezekiel refers to God's Spirit in today's first reading, he is referring to God's power to bring about life.

HOMILY: Today's gospel describes the Spirit as a river of living water. When John tells us, "there was no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified," he is not saying the Holy Spirit did not exist. He is saying the Holy Spirit had not yet been imparted to Jesus' followers. They had to wait until Jesus ascended to the Father and sent the Holy Spirit upon them.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who lived in the fourth century, asked this question in his commentary on today's gospel: "Why did Christ call the grace of the Spirit water?" He answers the question this way: "Because all things are dependent on water; plants and animals have their origin in water." In other words: water brings life. It's that simple. Without water life cannot exist. When we recite the Creed, we profess that the Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life.

The Holy Spirit is our connection with Christ. It is through the Spirit that we share in Christ's life. This is one of the basic gifts the Spirit gives us, a sharing in Christ's life. As with any life, our life in Christ is meant to be an active life. When a person is alive but they are inactive, it is either that they spend too much time in front of the TV or they are comatose. When the Spirit makes us alive in Christ, the Spirit also gives us gifts that help this life in Christ to flourish. According to St. Paul, such gifts are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control. (Galatians 5, 22 & 23) The Spirit also gives us gifts to help us live that life in service of others - many of which are named in the letters of St. Paul. Another way the Spirit helps us is mentioned in tomorrow's gospel. Jesus told us the Spirit will teach us and remind us of all that Jesus taught us.

The Spirit helps us individually, but the Spirit also helps us in and through the Church. Before Jesus died he established a community of believers and gave that community teachers and leaders. It was on this community, which is the Church, that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit. (This is why Pentecost is considered the birthday of the Church.) The Spirit touches our lives through this community, through its beliefs, its values, its sacraments, its teachings and through our love for one another as members of the same body of Christ of which we are a part as St. Paul will tell us tomorrow.

Sometimes people drop away from their religion. They claim to be spiritual people, but they have little use for organized religion. We should not be surprised that people who are an active part of a religious organization are not perfect. Christ did call sinners to follow him. Those who abandon organized religion and claim to be "spiritual" may have forgotten that if they are living by God's Holy Spirit, the Spirit would be calling them to be one with other believers so they can share in the many ways the Spirit works through the Church. It was a major part of Christ's prayer at the Last Supper that his followers be one as he and the Father are one, and surely the Spirit would be prompting Jesus' followers to follow Christ's wishes. Sometimes I wonder when someone tells me they are spiritual, but they snub organized religion, whether it is the Holy Spirit whose lead they are following or the spirit of our times that is relatively careless about our responsibilities toward God.

In today's second reading Paul tells us how the Spirit helps us as we pray. One of the special ways the Spirit helps us in prayer is in the Eucharist. And so we continue on, asking the Holy Spirit to help us offer ourselves and our love to our heavenly Father.

Feast of the Holy Trinity - C Cycle

May 30, 2010

INTRODUCTION

There are a number of books in the Old Testament called wisdom books. The books discuss topics such as the meaning of life or the meaning of suffering as well as practical idea on how to raise children or how to handle your money. Our first reading comes from one of the books in the wisdom tradition: the book of Proverbs. We tend to think of wisdom as a skill or as knowledge that contributes toward living a long and good life. The Jews sometimes described wisdom as a woman who tirelessly tries to lead people away from foolishness and sin. In today's reading wisdom is described as a person who was with God before creation and who helped God create the world. It does not describe the Trinity for that would have been incomprehensible to them at that time in history (about 500 BC) but, with our knowledge of the Trinity, we can see a vague foreshadowing of what was to be revealed at a later time through Jesus.

HOMILY

Today we encounter the mystery of all mysteries, the mystery that underlies our faith and our entire spiritual lives. It is a mystery too great for many people to accept. Many people prefer having a God whom they can understand. My suspicion is that if God is someone I can completely understand, someone probably made him up. I think we should not be surprised that the God who made all things is greater than all things, including our human intellect.

I have been spending a lot of time in the past several months thinking about why we believe in a Trinity. The only answer for the source of our belief in the Trinity is in what Jesus did and said and as it is recorded for us in the New Testament. The NT never used the word Trinity. That word was coined by Tertullian, a Christian philosopher who was born about 115 -120 years after Jesus died. Tertullian coined this word "Trinity" as he was trying to find a way to put into words the faith of the early Church about Christ. Jesus certainly showed himself to be a unique person. The question was "how unique?" He spoke with authority and originality. He spoke of God as "my Father," sometimes even using a term that a child might use to address his or her father, "Abba." Speaking only as God could speak, he forgave sins, he authoritatively interpreted the Law of Moses, he made demands on people such as forbidding divorce, loving and forgiving even one's enemies, he worked marvelous signs and he acted against evil with amazing power. "Thomas's profession of faith, 'My Lord and my God,' summed up the impact that Jesus as the risen Lord had on the majority of his followers." (God, Engaging Theology: Catholic Perspectives by Joseph A. Bracken, pg 6) After his resurrection, starting with Peter on Pentecost, his followers claimed that Jesus sat at the right hand of God and he poured the Spirit upon his disciples (something only God could do). A creed we say if we say the rosary, the Apostles' Creed, goes back almost to the time of the Apostles. How could one claim that Jesus was divine? This was a revolutionary idea that Jesus, a laborer from the backwater town of Nazareth who had been condemned and executed as a criminal, and whom his followers claimed to see alive three days later, was the same as the God who created the world, the same God whom the Jews had worshipped for almost 2000 years. If Jesus were God, and the one he called "Father" were God, how could that be? How could one express this belief. Many of his followers tried, including people whose names were Origin, Tertullian, Arius, St. Athenatius, St. Hilary of Potier, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory of Nazienzen, St. Augustine, just to name a few. It took almost three hundred years of discussion and controversy, with some ideas being accepted, others being rejected, not to mention there was some bloodshed over this issue. (People took theology seriously in those days!) It wasn't until 325, in an effort to keep peace in his empire, Constantine called the bishops together to Nicaea to define this relationship between Jesus and God the Father. Fifty-six years later another council was called, the Council of Constantinople, to further clarify and expand on the Council of Nicaea. The Council of Constantinople defined the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus spoke about and Paul wrote about, as the third person of the Trinity. That is the Creed that we profess every Sunday.

St. Augustine gave us seven statements about the Trinity that doesn't take away the mystery but it describes it very simply: "The Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is not the Father; there is only one God." The Father, Son and Spirit are three separate persons, but so closely bound

together that they are one God. What is the bond that truly unites persons? It is love. So when John tells us God is love, he is telling us how this can be: three person in one divine being, equal in every way, but differing from one another in their relationship with each other.

It is into that loving union that we are invited through the gift of God's life that comes to us through grace. It is through our love for God and for one another, through prayer and through the sacraments that our union with God deepens. Some day it will all come together for us and make sense, but until it does we walk by faith. We are blessed to be able to express that faith in our Mass today as we offer to our heavenly Father the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, our brother, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.