

The 5th Sunday of Easter Readings

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 6:1-7

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

As the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19

Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

Exult, you just, in the LORD; praise from the upright is fitting. Give thanks to the LORD on the harp; with the ten-stringed lyre chant his praises.

Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

Upright is the word of the LORD, and all his works are trustworthy. He loves justice and right; of the kindness of the LORD the earth is full.

Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

See, the eyes of the LORD are upon those who fear him, upon those who hope for his kindness, To deliver them from death and preserve them in spite of famine.

Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you.

SECOND READING: Peter 2:4-9

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Peter:

Beloved: Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it says in Scripture: Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame. Therefore, its value is for you who have faith, but for those without faith: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone, and A stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall. They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny. You are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises" of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 14:1-12

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus said to his disciples: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where I am going you know the way." Thomas said to him, "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves. Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father."

The Gospel of the Lord.

The 5th Sunday of Easter Reflection

In 1975 I began my first year at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary which is the major seminary or graduate school of theology for the Archdiocese of Chicago. I also went to work, for my apostolate, at St. Boniface Parish just west of downtown off Chicago Avenue near Ashland Avenue. The parish closed in 1999. It was a multi-ethnic parish that cared for a combined English speaking and Spanish speaking community. Rarely did the entire parish gather together. Bi-lingual services were an annoyance to both communities. There was one parish though. I find it interesting to hear the first reading tell a similar story.

I have worked in several multi-lingual communities since then. Some of the parishes serviced several different ethnic communities. The problems we faced were the same ones faced in today's story from the Acts of the Apostles. Usually in those parishes, the people first, out of Christian Charity, welcomed new comers until they began to grow larger and began to have more than one mass. Then the complaining would begin. Sadly, the solution has never gotten easier. Language is always a boundary. It is always too easy to see others as different. We are one in Jesus but ethnicity can drive us apart. Rejoicing in brothers and sisters who pray and worship in another language and are part of our community doesn't always happen. It is easier to complain.

There is a passage in the Acts of the Apostles that says the community was of one mind and heart. I suspect that this was for no longer than ten or fifteen minutes. The solution to the problem is also the same then as today. It is to establish a new ministry. The new comers must care for themselves. We humans are a tribal people. We find it difficult to see diversity as a blessing. One gift of the Holy Spirit is for the gospel to be preached in many tongues for the

many peoples of the world. In multicultural parishes we can witness the Spirit's gift of tongues in action. A simple shift of perspective can change us.

We call the people recruited, all men, for this ministry Deacons. The word used in the text is "to serve at tables." What prevented the elders and apostles from waiting on tables? The apostles preached and taught. They were the front line of the mission. They went out into the larger community. They recruited new members, the very members who had the specific and added needs for service. The Church was growing and experienced the subsequent pain of the growth.

The situation we face today is much the same. To maintain the community and to carry on the mission to evangelize is neither easy nor simple. Maintenance and growth are hard to balance. It takes money, workers, cooperation and vision. They gathered together and depended on each other. They needed good leadership and had to work together to solve their problems. These experiences link us through time and through Christ. We come, like they came, to know Jesus in the breaking of bread. Christ works through us just as he worked through them.

There is a common mistake anyone who reads the scriptures can make. We can view the texts from our historical and cultural perspective. The apostles weren't exactly bishops. They were the missionaries who went out to establish new churches. When we say churches they were communities and not buildings. The word bishop in Greek means overseer or manager. When we hear the word deacon we think of clergy. They were the people who ran the communal soup kitchen. When we hear the word priest we can think of clergy again. There were no priests as we have them today. The Greek word for priests means elder. An elder can be one who is old, or better, experienced and truly established in faith. The priests who were joining the Christian Community were Jewish priests from the temple. They were the ones who offered sacrifice in the Temple of Jerusalem. Their actual work was to slaughter animals and cook them. They were butchers and barbeque masters. The actual Church was hidden, sometimes, due to persecution. Where there were many similarities to our Church, today, much was different as well.

Right now we have not been able to gather since the 14th of March. We have canceled all masses and meetings. We did not celebrate our St. Joseph's Table, Holy Week or Easter. I pray that when this pandemic ends, the threat of it will not end until there is a viable vaccine and an effective treatment for the symptoms, we will gather for a feast and celebration of resurrection. The people of the early Church hoped that Jesus would return soon. They had great hope that God's Kingdom would be established in their lifetime. They've been long dead and we await Jesus' return as well. Our immanent hope is for the return of normality and an end to the COVID 19 pandemic.

We are alive and still build the Church. We are living stones who normally fit together as we gather. We have suspended our gathering but not our desire to continue our mission. We may not be able to do much to spread the Good News but we can use our time to read scripture. Familiarity with God's word is a good thing. The Bible's called the Good Book because it tells the story of God and God's People. It tells the story of how people came to know God through their lived experience from the perspective of their faith. It's also a good book. I always recommend the book of Tobit. It is a tale of adventure, self discovery, horror, and vision. It is a love story too. It reads well as a short story. Amazon sells bibles for delivery and for a Kindle. You can read the bible on your phone. When we are able to gather for mass again, how much better can we understand the readings when we've all read them?

“Do not let your hearts be troubled! You believe in God; believe in me.” Since all of us live in a world with an invisible, potentially fatal disease, I surmise we all live with anxiety to some degree. Since troubled times trouble me, does it mean I don’t believe in God or Jesus? Is Jesus going to come and get me soon? I am at high risk of death from COVID 19 being sixty six years old! It’s easy to forget the story we didn’t hear this year: Jesus’ agony in the garden. It’s called agony for a reason. Jesus was afraid to face torture and death. He didn’t want to die. He prayed, “Father, take this cup from me!” He may have been afraid, but he also prayed, “Not my will, but thy will be done!” He chose the Passion anyway despite his fear. He accepted death on the cross even though he didn’t want to die. God gave him what he needed to do what he chose to do.

Jesus never gave us a map or a clear path to God. Jesus gave us himself. He said to Thomas when he asked for those things, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Jesus is the way to the Father. We have Jesus and Jesus has each of us. Jesus had each of us in mind as he died on the cross. It is easy to think of the collective. Jesus died to save the world. How did Jesus save the world? Jesus enters our lives, personally, one person at a time! We can say with conviction that Jesus died to save you and me. We can put our own name in the sentence.

There are many mansions. Is Jesus saying that we will have our own big, elegant house in heaven? What is our home? It’s where we belong. Where do we belong? We come from God at birth. We live with God through life. When we die, we return to God from where we first came. Every gift from God will eventually return to its source. Our life will make a full circle. We live by faith, not our feelings. Just because I worry doesn’t mean I don’t believe. My faith, like with Jesus, can help me face whatever I may fear. It may feel like stepping out into thin air into the unknown, but the cross of Jesus has placed us all in God’s loving arms. Nothing can break God’s embrace. Being in Jesus, the Father is in each of us. God’s embrace, being spiritual, will not infect us either.

With God, it is possible to stand back in wonder and awe. We face horrors in uncertainty. We also witness the self sacrifice of those who deliver dinner, the mail and groceries. We hear the cops’, paramedics’ and firemen’s sirens. Hopefully none of us will see doctors and nurses in the hospital. The pandemic is a horror. We witness God’s work through the work of others. As we practice social distancing we give witness too. I have no need for automobiles, bundling insurance or light weight steam cleaners (you can see how I spend my evenings). We need others.

I offer you this reflection in prayer and hope. This week end I will remember your presence at the masses I will celebrate on Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning.

James D. Beath
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