

Thursday of the Second Week of Easter Readings April 23, 2020

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 5:27-33

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

When the court officers had brought the Apostles in and made them stand before the Sanhedrin, the high priest questioned them, "We gave you strict orders did we not, to stop teaching in that name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and want to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the Apostles said in reply, "We must obey God rather than men. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses of these things, as is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." When they heard this, they became infuriated and wanted to put them to death.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 34:2 and 9, 17-18, 19-20

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall be ever in my mouth. Taste and see how good the LORD is; blessed the man who takes refuge in him.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

The LORD confronts the evildoers, to destroy remembrance of them from the earth. When the just cry out, the LORD hears them, and from all their distress he rescues them.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves. Many are the troubles of the just man, but out of them all the LORD delivers him.

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

GOSPEL: John 3:31-36

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things. But the one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. Whoever does accept his testimony certifies that God is trustworthy. For the one whom God sent speaks the words of God. He does not ration his gift of the Spirit. The Father loves the Son and has given everything over to him. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Thursday of the Second Week of Easter Reflection

The apostles, as portrayed in the gospels, were a bunch of stumbling, bumbling bumpkins who understood little of what Jesus taught. They had a hard time accepting, let alone integrating, the fundamental mission of Jesus into their lives. He was born to suffer and die. Whenever Jesus spoke to them about the nature of their mission, they would change the subject or, as Peter did, try to talk him out of it. His mission was to die on the Cross. They did see Jesus as the Son of the Father, the Son of Man and the Messiah. They believed Jesus came from God, but not that he would suffer and die. All twelve of them, in the three synoptic gospels, betrayed him. Judas turned Jesus in to the authorities. Peter denied him. The rest deserted him. In this reading Peter faced the Sanhedrin speaking boldly as he never spoke before. The Holy Spirit sure changed him. Pentecost was the catalyst to integrate the Faith of Jesus into their lives. Peter's eloquence is striking.

Speaking as a preacher, as I have for many years, I marvel at that. Would that I do that well. However, I do find a problem in Peter's rhetoric. The purpose of preaching is not just to illuminate or just make clear, the scriptures but to win people to Christ. This was not Peter's best hour for he winds up alienating and infuriating his audience (or congregation). Speaking from experience, I know that this is a possibility from time to time. One of my old homiletics professors told us that when people become angry at a homily, the preacher knows his words are not pabulum.

First of all, the death of Jesus was a recent event. It took centuries for the Church to integrate the Cross into perspective. In the former English liturgy, in the second Eucharistic Prayer there were these words from the Consecration, "On the night before he died, a death he freely accepted..." Please don't ask me what the words are now for when I have to read them, its odd grammar makes me sound like I'm Yoda from Star Wars. The Jews, for centuries, bore the brunt of guilt for the murder of Jesus for much of the Christian era. Christians have heaped that guilt upon them and have used it to justify bigotry and violence. The fact is that the Cross was part of God's plan in the Beginning. Read the Prologue from the gospel of John. Jesus freely accepted his Cross as the reason he, God, was born a human being. His mission was to become the only sacrifice that could redeem the human race from the bondage of sin and death. Jesus, as he prayed the night before his death in the Garden, "Not my will but thy will be done." God's will trumped the will of the authorities. They acted as God's instrument to fulfill God's will. Jesus rose to show that all this was true. The Blood of Jesus is upon the entire human race for salvation not condemnation. It was God's will that, through it, salvation could come to all as God's free gift. Peter did not have an advance degree in theology. He could have chosen a different tactic. He was the first pope. The letters of Paul did a better job of persuasion. He wrote them, as his own words tell us, at least fifteen years later.

There are two lines from the Psalm that stuck me as being appropriate. "The Lord hears the cry of the poor." "The Lord is close to the broken hearted." We face a pandemic; a disease that has no treatment or vaccine. All of us face its effects. Many have it; many have died. Since people cannot visit hospitals, nursing homes and jails, their loved ones die alone. There's even a moratorium on proper funerals. I got word that a priest friend's mother died last week in her 90's. He's holding off until September for a memorial service. I offered my condolences and prayers by email. This is our new reality. My brother lives in Wisconsin. His plant closed last

week. How long will he be able to pay his bills? Going out for food is now a thrill sport. The infection and death rate continue to rise. According to the Illinois Department of Health, as of this morning, there are 91 confirmed cases of COVID 19 in our zip code, 60706. We are all in this together and experience the anxiety, fear and grief that have come our way. To hear the words of the Psalm, the Lord hears and is near is significant. We may share the feelings surrounding this pandemic, but we also share faith in Jesus. Our challenge is to live by faith and not our feelings. Through the eyes of faith we can know the words of scripture are true.

Sometimes when I read the gospel of John I have to read it more than once. Like some poems, there is much meaning packed into its words. There are many symbols expressed in its language. Sometimes, though, the words remind me of John Lennon's words in his song, "I am the Walrus." "I am he and you are me and we are all together, goo goo gajob." The Beatles' lyrics are meant to entertain. The words of scripture shed light on the mind of God. When I approach any given passage in scripture I ask a few questions that are helpful:

- 1) What did I just read? A story? A saying? An insight?
- 2) Was there any person, action, things that seems important?
- 3) Did any phrase, word or sentence stand out?
- 4) What could it mean? Personally? Locally? Globally?

What is above? Who is above? Who comes from above? What is the testimony? What is the Spirit? Do I meet the criteria for life? The sky is above. The coronavirus has come out of the blue to infect us. It was transmitted into people from bats, they fly in the sky. Somehow, even though there can be contemporary meaning, and needs to be, found in the bible, I don't think the COVID 19 was on Jesus mind as he said this. The above was the realm of God. Holy places in ancient Israel were always on high ground like Mount Sinai or the Temple's hill. God is above figuratively not literally because God is within each person whether they know and believe or not. The one who came from above is Jesus. In John's Prologue Jesus is the Word of God. When God created creation all he did was speak. The Word, Jesus was the creative act. The Word God spoke is Love. As John Lennon also sang, "Love is all you need." Love is God's gift. Out of which comes creation, you and me, Faith, Hope, Charity, redemption, forgiveness and the promise of eternal life. An awful lot has come from God through Jesus. John the Baptist testified to this. Jesus words, works and resurrection testify even today to these gifts. We believe in God and in Jesus, whom he sent. We believe this because the Holy Spirit breathed the gift of life and faith into us. This belief is the only criteria we need to receive the promise of life. We have new life in Jesus now. We have the promise of new life in God's kingdom.

To unpack this passage, all it takes is a few, careful readings, some simple questions, a bit of time and the breath of the Holy Spirit for a bit of discernment. Jesus, basically, has told us something about himself and his relationship to the Father. He reveals he is God. If we trust his words and believe, we receive salvation and the promise of eternal life.

By the way, the questions I ask about scripture passages are not bad to ask ourselves as we cope with the new reality of life in a novel coronavirus world.

James D. Beath, April 23, 2020