

THE EASTER SEASON

Reflection for the Second Sunday of Easter, Cycle C

Last weekend we began our celebration of the Fifty Days of Easter, during which our church celebrates Jesus' victory over evil and darkness and death. My assumption is that we do take this event for granted. But, just think about it, what would it be like if we didn't believe in a life after death? Even though very few of us want to go to heaven *today* or *tomorrow*, it sure is comforting to have a strong faith in a life after death and especially in a life that is far more wonderful than anything we can imagine.

Our Easter Season Readings

As most of you know, during the Easter Season the first reading at Mass is not from the Old Testament, but from the *Acts of the Apostles*. The Acts, among other things, is the story of how the Holy Spirit energized the first disciples of Jesus to share the Good News with others and call them to conversion.

During *Cycle C* of the Easter Season, our second reading is from the *Book of Revelation*-probably the most difficult book of the Bible to understand and interpret. In the Book of Revelation, John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, is writing from the island of Patmos where he is in exile having been banished for his belief in Jesus. He is writing to fellow Christians who are also suffering for their faith. His correspondence seeks to give comfort to his audience.

Sustained by a firm faith in God's power to save and strengthened by the conviction that God would not abandon his followers to the forces of evil, John entrusts his present fears and future hopes to God and invites his readers to do likewise. The basic message of this book is: *Evil will not triumph over goodness, neither the evil of the Roman Empire nor even the evil of death caused by persecution.*

The "seven lamp stands" is a reference not just to seven churches, but also to all Christian churches, seven being the number that symbolizes perfection or totality. Jesus, the "Son of Man", is in their midst. Because of his presence, there is "nothing to fear." Because of his resurrection, Jesus "holds the keys over death." By standing with Jesus, Christians are assured of victory over all adversaries - even death.

During *Cycle A*, the Gospel we normally listen to is Matthew, sometimes called *The Year of Matthew*. During *Cycle B*, we usually listen to the Gospel of *Mark* and during *Cycles C* we normally listen to the Gospel of *Luke*. You might ask: What about John's Gospel? During the *Easter Season of Cycles A, B, and C* we listen to excerpts from John's Gospel with one or two exceptions.

On the Second Sunday of Easter in *all* three cycles we listen to the Gospel we heard in church today, John 20:19-31.

This Gospel, especially the first part of it, is often called "John's Pentecost" because in it, Jesus imparts his Holy Spirit to those present. In the first scene, Jesus comes to a group of *fear-filled, guilt-ridden* and *depressed* disciples. He stands in their midst and offers them *four* gifts: *peace, joy, the Holy Spirit* and *the power to forgive sins*. Because they had abandoned Jesus in his hour of need, the Apostles, most likely, felt a great need for "*shalom*", i.e., God's peace and reconciliation. The joy at seeing Jesus replaced the depression caused by his absence. The gift of the Holy Spirit empowered the Apostles to go forth and preach the Good News, casting aside all fear. The power to forgive sins enabled them to impart to others the saving power of Jesus. In time, this text would be looked upon as the Church's basis for the sacrament of reconciliation. Sins would be "retained" or not forgiven if people were not truly sorry for them or were unwilling to embrace Jesus' teachings.

By sharing with the disciples his wounds ("*he showed them his hands and side*"), Jesus is showing them that it is really him and not some ghost. Also, he is teaching them that there is no Easter glory without Good Friday pain. Third, Jesus may be saying to us: community is built when the participants learn to share their wounds.

Commenting on the second part of this gospel, scripture scholar, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Thomas is featured; his journey from doubt to faith is offered as an encouragement to all who, at various moments of their lives, struggle with the challenge of believing in Jesus and living accordingly. Moreover, this Thomas narrative helped the early church to come to grips with a challenge that became more pronounced as the authoritative and apostolic witnesses to the risen Jesus died. That challenge? How could someone believe in Jesus-risen without the benefit of an appearance? For a time, those who had not experienced Risen relied on the powerful preaching of those who had. But, as is clear in the interchange between Thomas and the others, hearing eyewitness testimony did not always lead to faith; "I'll never believe," said Thomas. Nor was seeing Jesus a guarantee of faith. Even when he saw Jesus, Thomas still desired the further experience of touch. Faith was born when Thomas responded to the challenge of Jesus: "Believe!" Faith grew when Thomas allowed the Spirit to move him to declare, "My Lord and My God!" Paul's earlier assertion that "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3) is realized in Thomas' profession of faith.

The narrative concludes with a beatitude that reaches out to all future generations of believers; moved by the Spirit and responsive to Jesus' challenge to believe, we too are blest. Blest in our belief, we are also mandated to serve as powerful preachers of the Good News, in all we are, in all we say, in all we do.

The Wounded Healer

Commenting on today's gospel, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

The risen Jesus still bore the wounds of his crucifixion on his glorified body. Why was this? This story may give us a clue to the answer.

It is about a single, working mother, who lives in New York. In a period of six years she saw her three sons shot dead, the youngest of them right in front of her door. It has left a deep wound in her heart. She relives her grief every time a child is killed in the neighborhood.

Yet she has refused to be trapped by fear and a sense of victimhood. Instead, she has reached out to others. She has become an eloquent advocate for gun control and community responsibility, talking at schools and other places. She started a support group for mothers in similar positions. And when a child dies, she visits the parents to comfort them.

She says that in the beginning she wished her sons had never been born. But now she says, "in their deaths there is sorrow, but there is also some unbelievable joy. If I had not had my three sons, I would not be the kind of person I am today. They help me to be strong. They help me not to be selfish."

The frame of her door still bears the marks of the bullets which killed her youngest son. Although she doesn't always notice them, she knows they are there. Why doesn't she have the frame repaired? 'I want those holes to be a constant reminder that a young man lost his life at that spot. When you fix things, people tend to forget.'

When you fix things, people tend to forget. Maybe that is why Jesus kept the marks of his wounds on his risen body. Firstly, those wounds helped the apostles to recognize him. The same Jesus who during his life manifested his power over evil is the one in whom God has manifested his power over death. Secondly, those wounds were the proof of his love. Jesus didn't just talk about love' he gave an example of it, and had the wounds to prove it-the mortal wounds the Good Shepherd suffered in defending his flock from the wolf.

Jesus did not hide his wounds. He showed them to Thomas and invited him to touch them. When Thomas touched the wounds of Jesus, his doubts vanished, and his faith was re-born.

The sacred and precious wounds of Jesus are a source of consolation, courage, and hope to us. They help us to come to terms with our own wounds. They help us not to be selfish. By his wounds we are healed of self-pity and the sense of victimhood.

There is a tendency to hide our wounds, because of the belief that displaying weakness does not create respect. However, those who don't disguise their own struggles, and who live through them, give hope to others. An understanding of their own pain enables them to convert their weakness into strength, and to offer their own experience as a source of healing to others.

It has been said that community happens when people learn to share their wounds. I am sure all of you who have belonged to an A.A. group, know the truth of this statement. I also know that many men and women who have been a part of a Small Christian Community group or CHRP or Christ Renews His Parish Formation Process also knows the truth of the above statement. Having belonged to a priests support group for almost thirty years, I also know that "community" happens when people learn to share their wounds.

I know from my ministry that many people carry a secret wound, hurt or failing for years and years. It becomes a huge burden. It often demands a big act of courage and faith to bring a secret hidden wound into the light of day. When it happens we invariably feel much lighter. It is as if a huge burden has been lifted from our back and heart. If you have been carrying a secret heavy burden for years, consider doing yourself a huge favor, consider sharing your burden. If you think that I or someone else in our office can be of assistance, do not hesitate to contact us.