



Lectio Divina

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¹*Annunciation from 13th century Armenian Gospel. Miniatures Armeniennes, Ayastan, Erevan 1967.*
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Monday, April 1, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Our living God,

our heart is glad and rejoices and we feel secure in our faith that we have a living person to believe in, Jesus Christ, who is risen from the dead. Let him show us the path of life, let us live in the joy of his presence and give us the grace to make us witnesses, so that we can proclaim with our whole life that Jesus is our risen, living Lord now and forever.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 28: 8-15

Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. And suddenly, coming to meet them, was Jesus. "Greetings," he said. And the women came up to him and, clasping his feet, they did him homage. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; there they will see me." Now while they were on their way, some of the guards went off into the city to tell the chief priests all that had happened. These held a meeting with the elders and, after some discussion, handed a considerable sum of money to the soldiers with these instructions, "This is what you must say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' And should the governor come to hear of this, we undertake to put things right with him ourselves and to see that you do not get into trouble." So they took the money and carried out their instructions, and to this day that is the story among the Jews.

Reflection

Easter! Today's Gospel describes the experience of the Resurrection which the disciples of Jesus had. At the beginning of his Gospel, in presenting Jesus, Matthew had said that Jesus is the Emmanuel, God with us (Mt 1: 23). Now, at the end, he communicates and increases this certainty of faith, because he proclaims that Jesus is risen (Mt 28: 6) and that he will be with us always, up to the end of time! (Mt 28: 20). In the contradictions of life, this truth is questioned, contested very much. Opposition is not lacking. The enemies, the chief priests of the Jews, defended themselves against the Good News of the Resurrection and sent word to say that the body had been stolen by the disciples (Mt 28: 11-13). This also happens today. On the one side, the effort of many persons to live and to witness to the resurrection. On the other side, so many evil people who fight against the resurrection and against life.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus is told through a symbolical language, which reveals the hidden sense of the events. Matthew speaks about the earthquake, of lightening and of the angels who announce the victory of Jesus over death (Mt 2-4). It is an apocalyptic language, very common at that time, to announce that finally the world had been transformed by the power of God! The hope of the poor, who reaffirmed their faith, was fulfilled: "He is alive in our midst!"

- Matthew 28: 8: The joy of the Resurrection overcomes fear. On Sunday morning, the first day of the week, two women went to the tomb, Mary of Magdala and Mary of James, also called the other Mary. All of a sudden the earth trembled and an angel

appeared as lightening. The guards who were guarding the tomb were so shaken up with fear that they were like dead men. The women were frightened but the angel encouraged them, announcing the victory of Jesus over death and sending them to go join the disciples of Jesus in Galilee. And in Galilee they would be able to see him again. Everything began there; they received the great revelation of the Risen Lord. The joy of the Resurrection began to overcome fear. Thus the announcement of life and resurrection begins in this way.

- Matthew 28: 9-10 - Jesus appears to the women. The women left quickly. In them there is a mixture of fear and of joy. These are sentiments typical of those who have a profound experience of the Mystery of God. Suddenly, Jesus himself went to meet them and said to them: "Rejoice!" And they fell on their knees and adored him. It is the attitude of the one who believes and accepts the presence of God, even if it surprises and goes beyond the human capacity of understanding. Now, Jesus himself orders them to go and join the brothers in Galilee: "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee and there they will see me."
- Matthew 28: 11-15 - The astuteness or guile of the enemies of the Good News. The opposition itself which Jesus had to face during his life, springs up again now after his Resurrection. The chief priests meet and give money to the guards. They should spread the news that the disciples have robbed the body of Jesus, and this in order to avoid everything which is said about the resurrection. The chief priests do not accept the Good News of the Resurrection. They prefer to believe that it is an invention on the part of the disciples – men and women – of Jesus.
- The significance of the testimony of the women. The presence of the women at the death, at the burial and at the resurrection of Jesus is significant. They are witnesses of the death of Jesus (Mt 27: 54-56). At the moment of the burial, they remain sitting before the tomb and, therefore, they can render witness of the place where Jesus was buried (Mt 27: 61). Now, on Sunday morning, they are there once again. They know that the empty tomb is truly the tomb of Jesus! The profound experience of death and resurrection which they had, transformed their lives. They themselves become qualified witnesses of the Resurrection in the Christian Communities. This is why they receive the order to announce: "Jesus is alive! He has risen from the dead!"

Personal Questions

- Which is the experience of resurrection that I have in my life? Is there in me some force which tries to oppose the experience of the resurrection? How do I react?
- Today, which is the mission of our community, of us, disciples of Jesus? From where can we draw force and strength and courage to fulfil our mission?

Concluding Prayer

I bless Yahweh who is my counsellor, even at night my heart instructs me. I keep Yahweh before me always, for with him at my right hand, nothing can shake me. (Ps 16: 7-8)

Tuesday, April 2, 2024

Opening Prayer

Our God of life,

we profess our faith in Jesus and recognize him as our Lord and Savior. Make us listen to him when he speaks his good news to us for it is a message of life.

May we also hear his voice when he cries out to us in people in need or simply when he speaks to us in people who express to us their joys and hopes, their love and their faith. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 20: 11-18

Mary was standing outside near the tomb, weeping. Then, as she wept, she stooped to look inside, and saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head, the other at the feet. They said, "Woman, why are you weeping?" "They have taken my Lord away," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him."

As she said this she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not realize that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and remove him." Jesus said, "Mary!" She turned round then and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbuni!" -- which means Master. Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to the brothers, and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

So Mary of Magdala told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and that he had said these things to her.

Reflection

Today's Gospel describes the apparition of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. The death of her great friend urges Mary to lose the sense of life. But she does not give up her search. She goes to the tomb in order to meet again the one whom death has taken away. There are moments in our life in which everything crumbles. It seems that everything is finished. Death, disasters, pain and suffering, disillusion, betrayals! So many things which may cause us to feel in the air, without standing on firm ground and which can lead us to fall into a deep crisis. But other things also happen. For example, that suddenly we meet a friend again and that can give us hope anew and can make us discover that love is stronger than death and defeat.

Chapter 20 in John's Gospel, besides the apparitions of Jesus to Magdalene, it also speaks about diverse episodes which reveal the richness, indicate the richness of the experience of the Resurrection:

- (a) to the beloved disciple and to Peter (Jn 20: 1-10);
- (b) to Mary Magdalene (Jn 20: 11-18);
- (c) to the community of disciples (Jn 20: 19-23) and
- (d) to the Apostle Thomas (Jn 20: 24-29).

The purpose of the writing of the Gospel is that of leading persons to believe in Jesus, and believing in him, to have life (Jn 20: 30-33).

In the way of describing the apparition of Jesus to Mary Magdalene one perceives, one is aware of the different stages of the road that she had to follow, of the sorrowful search up to the time of the encounter at Easter. These are also the stages through which we all have to pass, throughout our life, seeking God and living the Gospel.

- John 20: 11-13 - Mary Magdalene weeps, but she seeks. There was a very strong love between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. She was one of the few persons who had the courage to remain with Jesus up to the moment of his death on the Cross. After the obligatory rest on Saturday, she goes back to the tomb to be in the place where she had met her Beloved for the last time. But, surprisingly, the tomb is empty! The angels ask her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" and her response is: "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have put him!" Mary Magdalene looked for Jesus, that Jesus whom she had known during three years.
- John 20: 14-15 - Mary Magdalene speaks with Jesus without knowing him. The Disciples of Emmaus saw Jesus but they did not recognize him. She thinks that he is the gardener. And just as the angels had done, Jesus also asks: "Why are you weeping?" and he adds: "Who are you looking for?" The response: "If you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him and I will go and get him." She was still looking for the Jesus of the past, the same one of three days before. And it is precisely the image of the Jesus of the past which prevents her to recognize the living Jesus, who is present before her.
- John 20: 16: Mary Magdalene recognizes Jesus. Jesus pronounces the name: "Mary!" This was the sign to recognize him: the same voice, the same way of pronouncing the name. She answers: "Master!" Jesus had returned the same, as the one who had died on the cross. The first impression was that death was only a painful incident on the journey, but now everything has again become as before. Mary embraces Jesus strongly. He was the same Jesus whom she had known and loved. And thus, is fulfilled what the Parable of the Good Shepherd said: "He calls them by name and they recognize his voice." "I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (Jn 10: 3, 4, 14).
- John 20: 17-18 - Mary Magdalene receives the mission to announce the resurrection to the Apostles. In fact, it is the same Jesus, but the way of being together with her is not the same as before. Jesus tells her: "Do not cling to me, because I have not as yet ascended to the Father!" He goes toward the Father. Mary Magdalene has to let Jesus go and assume her mission: to announce to the brothers that he, Jesus, has ascended to the Father. Jesus has opened up the way for us and thus, once more, God is close to us.

Personal Questions

- Have you ever had an experience which has given you the impression of loss and of death? How was it? What is it that gave you new life and gave you the hope and the joy of living?
- Which is the change that took place in Mary Magdalene throughout the dialogue? Mary Magdalene was looking for Jesus in a certain way and found him in a different way. How does this take place in our life?

Concluding Prayer

We are waiting for Yahweh; he is our help and our shield, for in him our heart rejoices, in his holy name we trust. Yahweh, let your faithful love rest on us, as our hope has rested in you. (Ps 33: 20-22)

Wednesday, April 3, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

God our Father,

you are a God not of the dead nor of those paralyzed by their fears and limitations but the God of the living. Raise us up and make us walk forward in joy and hope as companions on the road of him whom you raised from the dead, Jesus Christ, our risen Lord forever.

Gospel Reading - Luke 24: 13-35

That very same day, two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, seven miles from Jerusalem, and they were talking together about all that had happened.

And it happened that as they were talking together and discussing it, Jesus himself came up and walked by their side; but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He said to them, "What are all these things that you are discussing as you walk along?" They stopped, their faces downcast. Then one of them, called Cleopas, answered him, "You must be the only person staying in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have been happening there these last few days." He asked, "What things?" They answered, "All about Jesus of Nazareth, who showed himself a prophet powerful in action and speech before God and the whole people; and how our chief priests and our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death and had him crucified. Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free. And this is not all: two whole days have now gone by since it all happened; and some women from our group have astounded us: they went to the tomb in the early morning, and when they could not find the body, they came back to tell us they had seen a vision of angels who declared he was alive. Some of our friends went to the tomb and found everything exactly as the women had reported, but of him they saw nothing."

Then he said to them, "You foolish men! So slow to believe all that the prophets have said! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer before entering into his glory?" Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself.

When they drew near to the village to which they were going, he made as if to go on; but they pressed him to stay with them saying, "It is nearly evening, and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. Now while he was with them at table, he took the bread and said the blessing; then he broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; but he had vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?" They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven assembled together with their companions, who said to them, "The Lord has indeed risen and has appeared to Simon." Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognized him at the breaking of bread.

Reflection

Today's Gospel speaks to us of a very well known episode, that of the apparition of Jesus to the Disciples of Emmaus. Luke writes in the year 80 for the communities of Greece which in their great majority were formed by converted pagans. The years 60's and 70's had been the most difficult ones. There had been the great persecution of Nero in the year 64. Six years later, in the year 70, Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Romans. In the year 72, in Masada, in the desert of Judah, there was the massacre of the last rebellious Jews. In those years, the Apostles, witnesses of the Resurrection, disappeared gradually. People began to feel tired on the journey. From where could they draw the courage so as not to get discouraged? How to discover the presence of Jesus in such a difficult situation? The story of the apparition of Jesus to the Disciples of Emmaus tries to give a response to all these anguishing questions. Luke wants to teach the communities how to interpret Scripture in order to be able to rediscover the presence of Jesus in life.

- Luke 24: 13-24 - 1st Step: to get away from reality. Jesus meets the two friends in a situation of fear and of lack of faith. The force of death, the cross, had killed in them their hope. This was the situation of many people at the time of Luke, and is also the situation of many persons today. Jesus gets close to them and walks by their side; he listens to their conversation and asks: "What are all these things that you are discussing as you walk along?" The dominating ideology, that is, the propaganda of the government and of the official religion of the time, prevent them from seeing. "Our hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free." Which is today the conversation of people who suffer? The first step is this one: get close to the persons, listen to their reality, feel their problems: be capable to ask questions which will help the persons to look at reality with a more critical look.
- Luke 24: 25-27 - 2nd step: use the Bible to enlighten life. Jesus uses the Bible and the history of people to enlighten the problem which made the two friends suffer, and to clarify the situation which they are living. He also uses it to place them in the whole project of God which came from Moses and the prophets. Thus, he indicates that history had not escaped from God's hand. Jesus uses the Bible not as a doctor who knows everything, but rather like a companion who comes to help the friends and to remind them what they had forgotten. Jesus does not set off to the disciples the complex of ignorance but tries to awaken their memory: Foolish and slow to believe all that the prophets have said! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer before entering into his glory?

This is the second step: With the Bible help persons to discover the wisdom which already exists in them, and transform the cross, a sign of death, into a sign of life and of hope. What prevented them from walking, now becomes for them force and light on the journey. How can we do this today?

- Luke 24: 28-32 - 3rd step: to share in community. The Bible, in itself, does not open the eyes. It only makes their heart burn, what opens the eyes and makes them see, is the breaking of the bread, the community gesture of sharing, and the celebration of the Supper. In the moment in which both recognize Jesus, they are born anew and Jesus disappears. Jesus does not take possession of the road of his friends. He is not paternalistic. Risen, the disciples are capable to walk alone.

The third step is the following: to know how to create a fraternal environment of faith, of celebration and of sharing, where the Holy Spirit can act. It is he who makes us

discover and experience the Word of God in life and which leads us to understand the sense of the words of Jesus (Jn 14: 26; 16: 13).

- Luke 24: 33-35 - 4th step: The result: To resurrect means to go back to Jerusalem. The two of them, courageously, get back on the road to go to Jerusalem, where the same forces of death, which had killed Jesus and, had killed their hope, continue to be active. But, now everything has changed. If Jesus is alive, then there is in him and with him a stronger power than that which killed him. This experience makes them resurrect! Truly, everything has changed. There is the return and not the flight! Faith and not unbelief! Hope and not despair! Critical conscience and not fatalism in the face of power! Liberty and not oppression! In one word: life and not death! Instead of the bad news of the death of Jesus, the Good News of his Resurrection! Both of them experience life and life in abundance! (Jn 10: 10). This is a sign that the Spirit of Jesus acts in them!

Personal Questions

- Both of them say: "We were hoping, but...!" Have you ever seen a situation of discouragement which has led you to say: "I was hoping, but...!?"
- How do you read, use and interpret the Bible? Have you ever felt your heart burning when reading and meditating on the Word of God? Do you read the Bible alone or are you part of a Bible group?

Concluding Prayer

Give thanks to Yahweh, call on his name, proclaim his deeds to the peoples! Sing to him, make music for him, recount all his wonders! (Ps 105: 1-2)

Thursday, April 4, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Almighty God and Father,

Jesus died for us on the cross and you raised him from the dead. We have not seen the marks of the nails in his hands nor touched the wound in his side, but we believe that he is alive and present here among us.

Open our hearts to his word and let us touch him in the bread of the eucharist, that he may raise us above our sins and change us into new people.

May we thus bear witness to your risen Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Luke 24: 35-48

Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognized him at the breaking of bread.

They were still talking about all this when he himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you!" In a state of alarm and fright, they thought they were

seeing a ghost. But he said, "Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts stirring in your hearts? See by my hands and my feet that it is I myself. Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have." And as he said this he showed them his hands and his feet. Their joy was so great that they still could not believe it, as they were dumbfounded; so he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" And they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes. Then he told them, "This is what I meant when I said, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets and in the Psalms, was destined to be fulfilled."

He then opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "So it is written that the Christ would suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that, in his name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to this."

Reflection

In these days after Easter, the texts of the Gospel narrate the apparitions of Jesus. At the beginning, in the first years after the death and the Resurrection of Jesus, the Christians were concerned in defending the Resurrection through the apparitions. They themselves, the living community, were a great apparition of the Risen Jesus. But in the measure in which the criticism of the enemies against the faith in the Resurrection increased, and that internally, there arose criticism and doubts concerning diverse functions in the community (cf. 1 Cor 1: 12), they began to recall the apparitions of Jesus. There are two types of apparitions:

- (a) those which stress the doubts and the resistance of the disciples in believing in the Resurrection, and
- (b) those who call the attention toward the orders of Jesus to the disciples – men and women – conferring some mission to them.

The first respond to the criticism which come from outside. These show that Christians are not naïve and credulous persons who accept everything and anything, rather all the contrary. They themselves had many doubts in believing in the Resurrection. The others respond to the criticism from within and found the community functions and tasks, not on human qualities which are always debatable, but on the authority and orders received from the Risen Jesus. The apparitions of Jesus in today's Gospel put together two different aspects: the doubts of the disciples and the mission to announce and to forgive received from Jesus.

- Luke 24: 35 - The summary of the story of Emmaus. Returning to Jerusalem, the two disciples found the community together and they shared with them the experience that they had lived. They told them what had happened along the road and how they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. The community gathered together, in turn, shared the apparition of Jesus to Peter. This was a reciprocal sharing of the experience of the Resurrection, as it also happens today when the communities gather together to share and celebrate their faith, their hope and their love.
- Luke 24: 36-37 - The apparition of Jesus causes great fright in the disciples. At this moment, Jesus becomes present among them and says: "Peace be with you!" This is the most frequent greeting of Jesus: "Peace be with you!" (Jn 14: 27; 16: 33; 20: 19, 21, 26). But the disciples in seeing Jesus were frightened and did not recognize him. Before them is Jesus in person, but they think that they are seeing a ghost, a phantasm. They cannot believe it. It is not the encounter between Jesus of Nazareth and the Risen Jesus.

- Luke 24: 38-40 - Jesus helps them to overcome fear and unbelief. Jesus does two things to help the disciples overcome the fear and the unbelief. He shows them his hands and his feet, saying: "It is I myself!," and tells them to touch his body saying: "A ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have!" Jesus shows his hands and feet because in them is the sign of the nails (cf. Jn 20: 25-27). The Risen Christ is Jesus of Nazareth, the same one who was nailed on the Cross and not a phantasm Christ as the disciples imagined, when they saw him. He orders them to touch his body, because the Resurrection is the Resurrection of the whole person, body and soul. The Resurrection has nothing to do with the theory of the immortality of the soul, which the Greeks taught.
- Luke 24: 41-43 - The other gesture to help them overcome unbelief. But it does not suffice! Luke said that they could not believe because their joy was so great that they became dumbfounded. Jesus asks them to give him something to eat. They offered him some fish and he eats it before them, to help them to overcome the doubt.
- Luke 24: 44-47 - A key for the reading to understand the new significance of the Scripture. One of the greatest difficulties of the first Christians was that of accepting the crucified as the promised Messiah, because the Law taught that a crucified person was a person cursed by God (Dt 21: 22-23). For this reason, it was important to know that Scripture had already announced that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that in his name, conversion and forgiveness of sins would be preached to all peoples. Jesus shows them that which had already been written in the Law of Moses, in the prophets and in the Psalms. Jesus risen from the dead, alive in their midst, becomes the key to open to them the total significance of Sacred Scripture.
- Luke 24: 48 - You are witnesses of this. In this last order is enclosed the whole mission of the Christian communities: to be witnesses of the Resurrection, in such a way that the love of God which accepts us and forgives us will be manifested, and which wants us to live in community as sons and daughters, brothers and sisters with one another.

Personal Questions

- Sometimes, unbelief and doubt set in the heart and weaken the certainty that faith gives us concerning the presence of God in our life. Have you ever lived this sometimes? How have you overcome it?
- Our mission, and also my mission, is that of being a witness of the love of God revealed in Jesus. Am I a witness of this love?

Concluding Prayer

What are human beings that you spare a thought for them, or the child of Adam that you care for him? (Ps 8: 4)

Friday, April 5, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Our God and Father,

through our risen Lord, your Son Jesus Christ, you have given us a message of hope and a person to live for. Free our faith from triviality and routine and fill us with his Spirit of courage, that we may learn to live with the insecurities of the change of renewal ever demanded by the gospel and by the needs of the times.

May our Christian living bear witness to the name of him by whom we are saved, Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 21:1-14

Later on, Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples. It was by the Sea of Tiberias, and it happened like this: Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee and two more of his disciples were together. Simon Peter said, "I'm going fishing." They replied, "We'll come with you." They went out and got into the boat but caught nothing that night. When it was already light, there stood Jesus on the shore, though the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. Jesus called out, "Haven't you caught anything, friends?" And when they answered, "No," he said, "Throw the net out to starboard and you'll find something." So they threw the net out and could not haul it in because of the quantity of fish.

The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." At these words, "It is the Lord," Simon Peter tied his outer garment round him (for he had nothing on) and jumped into the water. The other disciples came on in the boat, towing the net with the fish; they were only about a hundred yards from land.

As soon as they came ashore they saw that there was some bread there and a charcoal fire with fish cooking on it. Jesus said, 'Bring some of the fish you have just caught.' Simon Peter went aboard and dragged the net ashore, full of big fish, one hundred and fifty-three of them; and in spite of there being so many the net was not broken. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." None of the disciples was bold enough to ask, "Who are you?" They knew quite well it was the Lord.

Jesus then stepped forward, took the bread and gave it to them, and the same with the fish. This was the third time that Jesus revealed himself to the disciples after rising from the dead.

Reflection

Chapter 21 of the Gospel of Saint John seems like an appendix which was added later after the Gospel had already been written. The conclusion of the previous chapter (Jn 20: 30-31) makes one perceive that it is an addition. However, whether it is an addition or not, it is the Word of God which presents us the beautiful message of the Resurrection on this fifth day of Easter week.

- John 21: 1-3 - The fisherman of men returns to be a fisherman of fish. Jesus has died and has risen. At the end of three years of life together with Jesus, the disciples returned toward Galilee. A group of them find themselves together before the lake. Peter goes back to the past and says: "I am going fishing!" The others answer: "We will come with you!" Thus, Thomas, Nathanael, John, and James together with Peter go to the boat to go fishing. They go back to the life of the past as if nothing had happened. But something did happen. Something was taking place! The past did not return! -We have caught nothing! They go back to the shore, tired. This had been a night filled with frustration.

- John 21: 4-5 - The context of the new apparition of Jesus. Jesus was on the shore, but they did not recognize him. Jesus asks: "Little children, have you anything to eat?" They answered: "No!" In the negative response they realize that the night had been deceiving because they had caught nothing, no fish. They had been called to be fishermen of men (Mk 1: 17; Lk 5: 10), and they go back to be fishermen of fish. But something had changed in their life! The experience of three years with Jesus produces in them an irreversible change. It was no longer possible to return to the past as if nothing had happened, as if nothing had changed.
- John 21: 6-8 - "Throw the net out to the right of the boat and you will find something. They did something which perhaps they had never done in their life. Five experienced fishermen obey a foreigner who orders them to do something which is in contrast to their experience. Jesus, that unknown person, who is on the shore, orders them to throw the net on the right side of the boat. They obey; they throw the net and behold the unexpected result. The net was full of fish! How was this possible! How to explain this surprise so unexpected, unforeseen! Love makes one discover. The beloved disciple says: "It is the Lord." This intuition clarifies everything. Peter jumped into the water to get close to Jesus very quickly. The other disciples follow him, pulling the boat, and dragging the net full of fish.
- John 21: 9-14 - The kindness of Jesus. Coming ashore, they saw a charcoal fire which had been lit by Jesus, where he was roasting fish and bread. He asked them to take some of the fish they had caught and immediately Peter went to the boat and towed the net containing one hundred and fifty fish. A great number of fish and the net did not break. Jesus calls the multitude: "Come and eat!" He had the kindness to prepare something to eat after a deceiving night during which they had caught nothing. A very simple gesture which reveals something of God's love for us. "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14: 9). None of the disciples was bold enough to ask, "Who are you," because they knew he was the Lord. And recalling the Eucharist, John, the Evangelist contemplates: Jesus stepping forward took the bread and gave it to them. Thus, he suggests that the Eucharist is the privileged place for the encounter with the Risen Jesus.

Personal Questions

- Has it ever happened to you that someone has told you to throw the net to the right side of your life, to do something contrary to your experience? Have you obeyed? Have you thrown in the net?
- The kindness of Jesus. How is your kindness in the small things of life?

Concluding Prayer

Give thanks to Yahweh for he is good, for his faithful love endures forever. Let those who fear Yahweh say,

"His faithful love endures forever." (Ps 118)

Saturday, April 6, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Our God and Father,

your Son Jesus lived among us, flesh of our flesh, blood of our blood. He died for our sake and you raised him back to life.

May we experience his love and his presence to such an extent that we can never stop proclaiming what we have seen and heard, and that people may give glory to you, our God. We ask this in the name of Jesus the Lord.

Gospel Reading - Mark 16: 9-15

Having risen in the morning on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary of Magdala from whom he had cast out seven devils. She then went to those who had been his companions, and who were mourning and in tears, and told them. But they did not believe her when they heard her say that he was alive and that she had seen him.

After this, he showed himself under another form to two of them as they were on their way into the country. These went back and told the others, who did not believe them either.

Lastly, he showed himself to the Eleven themselves while they were at table. He reproached them for their incredulity and obstinacy, because they had refused to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation."

Reflection

Today's Gospel forms part of a broader literary unit (Mk 16: 9-20) which places us before a list or summary of diverse apparitions of Jesus: (a) Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, but the disciples do not accept her testimony (Mk 16: 9-11); (b) Jesus appears to the disciples, but the others do not accept their testimony (Mk 16: 12-13); (c) Jesus appears to the eleven, he criticizes their lack of faith and orders them to announce the Good News to all (Mk 16: 14- 18); (d) Jesus ascends to Heaven and continues to cooperate with the disciples (Mk 16: 19-20).

Besides this list of apparitions in the Gospel of Mark, there are other lists of apparitions which do not always coincide among themselves. For example, the list kept by Paul in the Letter to the Corinthians is very different (1 Cor 15: 3-8). This variety shows that at the beginning the Christians were not concerned to prove the Resurrection by means of the apparitions. For them faith in the Resurrection was so evident and alive that there was no need to prove it. A person who takes sun on the shore is not concerned in showing that the sun exists, because she herself, sun burnt, is the evident proof of the existence of the sun. The communities, existing in the midst of the immense Empire, were a living proof of the Resurrection. The list of the apparitions began to appear later, in the second generation in order to refute the criticism of the enemies.

- Mark 16: 9-11: Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, but the other disciples do not believe her. Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene. She goes to announce this to the others. To come into the world, God wanted to depend on the womb of a young girl 15 or 16 years old, called Mary of Nazareth (Lk 1: 38). To be recognized alive in our midst, he wants to depend on the announcement of a woman who had been liberated from seven devils, also called Mary, of Magdala! (This is why she was called Mary Magdalene). But the others did not believe her. Mark says that Jesus appeared first

to Magdalene. In the list of apparitions, transmitted in the letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15: 3-8), the apparitions of Jesus to the women are not mentioned. The first Christians had difficulty to believe in the testimony of women. It is a sin!

- Mark 16: 12-13: Jesus appears to the disciples, but the others do not believe them. Without too many details, Mark refers to an apparition of Jesus to two disciples, –while they were on their way into the country. This is perhaps a summary of the apparition of Jesus to the disciples of Emmaus, narrated by Luke (Lk 24: 13-35). Mark insists in saying that –the others did not believe them either.
- Mark 16: 14-15: Jesus criticizes the unbelief and orders them to announce the Good News to all creatures. For this reason, Jesus appears to the Eleven and reproaches them because they had not believed the persons who had seen him resurrected. Once again, Mark refers to the resistance of the disciples in believing to believe the testimony of those who have experienced the Resurrection of Jesus. Why? Probably to teach three things. In the first place that faith in Jesus passes through the faith in the persons who give witness. In the second place, that nobody should be discouraged, when the doubt or the unbelief arises in the heart. In the third place, in order to refute the criticism of those who said that the Christian is naïve and accepts without criticism any news, because the Eleven had great difficulty to accept the truth of the Resurrection!

Today's Gospel ends with the sending out: "Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Gospel to all creation!" Jesus confers to them the mission to announce the Good News to all creatures.

Personal Questions

- Mary Magdalene, the two disciples of Emmaus and the eleven disciples: who had the greatest difficulty to believe in the Resurrection? Why? With whom do I identify myself?
- Which are the signs which can convince persons of the presence of Jesus in our midst?

Concluding Prayer

May God show kindness and bless us, and make his face shine on us. Then the earth will acknowledge your ways, and all nations your power to save. (Ps 67: 1-2)

Sunday, April 7, 2024

Second Sunday of Easter

Opening Prayer

Father, who on the Lord's day gather your people to celebrate the One who is the First and the Last, the living One who conquered death, grant us the strength of your Spirit so that, having broken the chains of evil, calmed our fears and indecisions, we may render the free service of our obedience and love, to reign in glory with Christ.

LECTIO

A Key to the Reading

We are in the so-called book of the resurrection where we are told, in a not-so-logical sequence, several matters concerning the risen Christ and the facts that prove it. In the fourth Gospel, these facts take place in the morning (20: 1-18) and evening of the first day after the Saturday and eight days later, in the same place and on the same day of the week. We are before an event that is the most important in the history of humanity, an event that challenges us personally. If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is useless and you believing it is useless ... and you are still in your sins (1Cor 15: 14, 17) says Paul the apostle who had not known Jesus before his resurrection, but who zealously preached him all his life. Jesus is the sent of the Father. He also sends us. Our willingness to go comes from the depth of the faith we have in the Risen One. Are we prepared to accept his mandate and to give our lives for his Kingdom? This passage is not just about the faith of those who have not seen (the witness of Thomas), but also about the mission entrusted to the Church by Christ.

A Suggested Division of the Text to Facilitate Its Reading

- 20: 19-20: appearance to the disciples and showing of the wounds
- 20: 21-23: gift of the Spirit for the mission
- 20: 24-26: special appearance to Thomas eight days later
- 20: 27-29: dialogue with Thomas
- 20: 30-31: the aim of the Gospel according to John

The Text:

¹⁹ On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." ²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴ Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶ Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing." ²⁸ Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; ³¹ but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

A Moment of Silence

to allow the Word to enter into our hearts

MEDITATIO

A Few Questions to Help in Our Meditation:

Who or what drew my interest and wonder in the reading? Is it possible for someone to profess being Christian and yet not believe in the Resurrection of Jesus? Is it so important to believe in the resurrection? What would be different if we stopped at his teaching and witness of life? What does the gift of the Spirit for the mission mean to me? How does Jesus' mission in the world continue after the Resurrection? What is the content of the missionary proclamation? What value has Thomas' witness for me? What are, if any, my doubts concerning the faith? How do I meet them and still carry on? Am I able to give reasons for my faith?

Comment:

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week: the disciples are living through an extraordinary day. For the community, at the time of the writing of the fourth Gospel, the day after the Sabbath is already –the Lord's day (Ap 1: 10), *Dies Domini* (Sunday) and is more important than the Sabbath was in the tradition of the Jews.

The doors were closed: a detail which shows that the body of the risen Jesus, even though recognizable, is not subject to the ordinary laws of human life.

Peace be with you: this is not just a wish, but the actual peace promised to them when they were saddened by his departure (Jn 14: 27; 2Thes 3: 16; Rom 5: 3), the messianic peace, the fulfilment of the promises made by God, freedom from all fear, victory over sin and death, reconciliation with God, fruit of his passion, free gift of God. This peace is repeated three times in this passage as well as in the introduction (20: 19) further on (20: 26) in the exact same way.

He showed them his hands and his side: Jesus provides evident and tangible proof that he is the one who was crucified. Only John records the detail of the wound in the side caused by the spear of a Roman soldier, whereas Luke mentions the wound of the feet (Lk 24: 39). In showing his wounds, Jesus wants to say that the peace he gives comes from the cross (2Tim 2: 1-13). They are part of his identity as the risen One (Ap 5: 6).

The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord: This is the same joy expressed by the prophet Isaiah when he describes the divine banquet (Is 25: 8-9), the eschatological joy foreshadowed in the farewell speech and that no one can take away (Jn 16: 22; 20: 27). Cfr. also Lk 24: 39-40; Mt 28: 8; Lk 24: 41.

As the Father sent me, so am I sending you: Jesus is the first missionary, –the apostle and high priest of the faith we profess (Ap 3: 1). After the experience of the cross and the resurrection, Jesus' prayer to the Father comes true (Jn 13: 20; 17: 18; 21: 15,17). This is not a new mission, but the mission of Jesus extended to those who are his disciples, bound to him like branches are bound to the vine (15: 9), so also they are bound to his Church (Mt 28: 18- 20; Mk 16: 15-18; Lk 24: 47-49). The eternal Son of God was sent so that –the world might be saved through him (Jn 3: 17) and the whole of his earthly existence, fully identified with the saving will of the Father, is a constant manifestation of that divine will that all may be saved. He leaves as an inheritance this historical project to the whole Church and, especially to ordained ministers within that Church.

He breathed on them: this action recalling the life-giving breath of God on man (Gen 2: 7), does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament. It marks the beginning of a new creation.

Receive the Holy Spirit: after Jesus was glorified, the Holy Spirit was bestowed (Jn 7: 39). Here the Spirit is transmitted for a special mission, whereas at Pentecost (Acts 2) the Holy Spirit comes down on the whole people of God.

For those whose sins you forgive they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained: we find the power to forgive or not forgive sins also in Matthew in a more juridical form (Mt 16: 19; 18: 18). According to the Scribes and Pharisees (Mk 2: 7), and according to tradition (Is 43: 25), God has the power to forgive sins. Jesus gives this power (Lk 5: 24) and passes it on to his Church. In our meditation, it is better not to dwell on this text's theological development in church tradition and the consequent theological controversies. In the fourth Gospel the expression may be taken in a wide sense. Here it is a matter of the power of forgiving sins in the Church as salvation community and those especially endowed with this power are those who share in the apostolic charism by succession and mission. In this general power is included the power to forgive sins also after baptism, what we call –the sacrament of reconciliation! expressed in various forms throughout the history of the Church.

Thomas, called the Twin, who was one of the Twelve: Thomas is one of the main characters of the fourth Gospel and his doubting character, easily discouraged, is emphasized (11: 16; 14: 5). –One of the twelve is by now a stereotyped expression (6: 71), because in fact they were only eleven. –Didimus means “the Twin,” and we could be his twin with our difficulty in believing in Jesus, Son of God who died and rose again.

We have seen the Lord! When Andrew, John and Philip had found the Messiah, they had already run to announce the news to others (Jn 1: 41-45). Now there is the official proclamation by eye-witnesses (Jn 20: 18).

Unless I see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made, and unless I can put my hand into his side, I refuse to believe: Thomas cannot believe the eye-witnesses. He wants to experience the event himself. The fourth Gospel is aware of the difficulty that some may have in believing in the Resurrection (Lk 24; 34-40; Mk 16: 11; 1Cor 15: 5-8), especially those who have not seen the risen One. Thomas is their (and our) interpreter. He is willing to believe, but he wants to resolve personally any doubt, for fear of being wrong. Jesus does not see in Thomas an indifferent sceptic, but a man in search of truth and satisfies him fully. This is, however, an occasion to express an appreciation of future believers (verse 29).

Put your finger here, look, here are my hands. Give me your hand; put it into my side. Doubt no longer but believe! Jesus repeats the words of Thomas and enters into a dialogue with him. He understands Thomas' doubts and wishes to help him. Jesus knows that Thomas loves him and therefore has compassion for him because Thomas does not yet enjoy the peace that comes from faith. Jesus helps him to grow in faith. In order to enter deeper into this theme, see the parallels in: 1Jn 1-2; Ps 78: 38; 103: 13-14; Rom 5: 20; 1Tim 1: 14-16.

My Lord and my God! This is a profession of faith in the risen One and in his divinity as is also proclaimed in the beginning of John's Gospel (1: 1). In the Old Testament –Lord and God correspond respectively to –Yahweh and –Elohim (Ps 35: 23-24; Ap 4: 11). It is the fullest and most direct paschal profession of faith in the divinity of Jesus. In Jewish circles these terms had greater value because they applied to Jesus texts concerning God. Jesus does not correct the words of Thomas as he corrected the words of the Jews who accused him of wanting to be –equal to God (Jn 5: 18ff) thus approving the acknowledgement of his divinity.

You believe because you can see me. Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe! Jesus cannot stand those who look for signs and miracles in order to believe (Jn 4: 48) and he seems to take Thomas to task. Here we must remember another passage concerning a more authentic faith, a way of perfection towards a faith to which we must aspire without the demands of Thomas, a faith received as gift and as an act of trust, like the exemplary faith of our ancestors (Ap 11) and of Mary (Lk 1: 45). We, who are two thousand years after the coming of Jesus, are told that, although we have not seen him, yet we can love him and believing in him we can exult with —an indescribable and glorious joy! (1Pt 1: 8).

These (signs) are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name. The fourth Gospel, like the other Gospels, does not mean to write a complete biography of Jesus, but only to show that Jesus was the Christ, the awaited Messiah, the Liberator, and that he was the Son of God. Believing in him means that we possess eternal life. If Jesus is not God, then our faith is in vain!

ORATIO

Psalm 118 (117)

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say,

"His steadfast love endures forever." Let those who fear the LORD say, "His steadfast love endures forever."

I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me.

The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.

Hark, glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous.

The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.

This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.

This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us, we beseech thee, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech thee, give us success!

CONTEMPLATIO

Closing Prayer

I thank you Jesus, my Lord and my God, that you have loved me and called me, made me worthy to be your disciple, that you have given me the Spirit, the One sent to proclaim and witness to your resurrection, to the mercy of the Father, to salvation and pardon for all men and women in the world. You truly are the way, the truth and the life, the dawn without a setting, the sun of justice and peace. Grant that I may dwell in your love, bound to you like a branch to its vine. Grant me your peace so that I may overcome my weaknesses, face my doubts and respond to your call and live fully the mission you entrusted to me, praising you forever. You who live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, April 8, 2024

Solemnity – The Annunciation of the Lord

Opening Prayer

Merciful Father, in this holy time of prayer and of listening to Your Word, send also to me Your holy angel that I may receive the proclamation of salvation and that, after opening my heart, I may offer my yes to Love. Let, I beg You, the Holy Spirit overshadow me as an overwhelming power. From now on, Father, I do not wish to express anything other than my "Yes!" and to say to You: "Behold, I am here for You. Do unto me whatever pleases You." Amen.

Gospel Reading – Luke 1: 26-38

a) The context of the passage:

The story of the annunciation takes us from the temple, a holy place par excellence, to the house, to the intimacy of a personal meeting of God with His creature; it leads us into ourselves, into the deepest part of our being and our story, where God alone can reach and touch us. The announcement of the birth of John the Baptist had opened the sterile womb of Elizabeth, thus overcoming the absolute powerlessness of humankind and transforming it into the ability to collaborate with God. On the other hand, the announcement of the birth of Jesus, knocks on the door of a fertile womb of the one who is "full of grace" and awaits a reply: it is God who waits for our yes so as to work everything in us.

b) An aid to the reading of this passage:

vv. 26-27: The first two verses place us at the time and sacred space of the event on which we are meditating and which we relive: we are in the sixth month from the conception of John the Baptist and in Nazareth, a city in Galilee, the land of the marginalized and unclean. Here God has come down to speak with a virgin, to speak to our hearts.

The people involved in this unsettling event are presented to us: Gabriel, the messenger of God, a young woman called Mary and her spouse Joseph of the royal house of David. We too are made welcome into this company and are called to enter into the mystery.

vv. 28-29: These are the very first words of the dialogue between God and His creature: just a few words, a mere breath, but all-powerful words that disturb the heart, that question deeply the meaning of human life, plans and expectations. The angel announces joy, grace and the presence of God; Mary is disturbed and asks herself how can any of this be happening to her. Where can such a joy come from? How can such a great grace, that can change her very being, be hers?

vv. 30-33: These are the central verses of the excerpt: it is the explosion of the announcement, the manifestation of the gift of God, of His omnipotence in the life of human beings. Gabriel, the strong, speaks of Jesus: the eternal king, the Savior, the God made child, the humble all-powerful. He speaks of Mary, of her womb, of her life that she was chosen to be the gateway to welcoming God in this world and into the lives of all people. Even at this stage of the events, God begins to draw near, to knock. He stands, attentive, by the door of the heart of Mary, and even now by our house, our hearts...

v. 34: Mary, faced with God's proposal, allows herself to stand naked. She allows herself to be read to her very depths. She speaks of herself, her heart, her wishes. She knows that for God the impossible is possible; she does not doubt or harden her heart and mind; she does not count the cost; she only wants to be fully available, open, and allows herself to

be reached by that humanly impossible touch, but one already written, already realized in God. In a gesture of utter poverty, she places before God her virginity, her not knowing man. This is a complete and absolute surrender of self, full of faith and trust. It is her preliminary yes.

vv. 35-37: God, most humble, gives an answer; the all-powerful bends over the fragility of this woman, who represents each one of us. The dialogue continues; the covenant grows and is strengthened. God reveals the how. He speaks of the Holy Spirit, of the fruitful overshadowing, which does no violence, does not break, but preserves intact. He speaks of the human experience of Elizabeth. He reveals another impossible thing made possible; almost like a guarantee or security. And then comes the last word when one must make a choice: to say yes or no, believe or doubt, dissolve or harden oneself, to open the door or close it. "Nothing is impossible for God."

v. 38: The last verse seems to contain an infinity. Mary says her "Here I am." She opens herself wide to God and then the meeting, the union takes place forever. God enters into the human and the human becomes the place of God: these are the most sublime nuptials possible on earth. And yet, the Gospel ends on a sad and hard note: Mary stays alone; the angel leaves. What remains, however, is the yes pronounced to God and God's presence; what remains is real life.

c) The Text:

The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, he said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you." But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his Kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

I have read and listened to the words of the Gospel. Now I stand in silence ... God is present, at the door, and asks for shelter, yes, even from me and from my poor life ...

A Few Questions

a) God's announcement, His angel, enters my life, stands before me and speaks to me. Am I prepared to welcome Him, to give Him space, to listen to Him attentively?

b) Suddenly I receive an upsetting announcement. God speaks to me of joy, grace and presence: all the things that I have been seeking for so long, always. Who can make me really happy? Am I willing to trust in His happiness and His presence?

c) Not much is needed, just a movement of the heart, of my being; He is already aware of this. He is already overwhelming me with light and love. He says to me, "You have found favor in My sight." So, I please God? He finds me pleasant, loveable? Yes, that is how it really is. Why is it that I would not believe it before? Why have I not listened to Him?

d) The Lord Jesus wants to come into this world also through me; He wants to reach my brothers and sisters through the paths of my life, of my being. Would I lead Him astray? Would I refuse Him, keep Him at a distance? Would I wipe Him out of my story, my life?

A Key to the Reading

Some important and strong words that resonate in this Gospel passage.

• Rejoice!

This is a really strange greeting from God to His creature; it seems hard to explain and perhaps even senseless. And yet, for centuries it resonated in the pages of Sacred Scripture and thus also on the lips of the Hebrew people. Rejoice, be glad, exult! Many times the prophets had repeated this gentle breath of God and had shouted the silent beat of His heart for His people, His remnant. I read this in Joel: "Land, do not be afraid; be glad, rejoice, for Yahweh has done great things... (2: 21-23); in Zephaniah: "Shout for joy, daughter of Zion, Israel, shout aloud! Rejoice, exult with all your heart, daughter of Jerusalem! Yahweh has repealed your sentence" (3: 14); in Zechariah: "Sing, rejoice, daughter of Zion, for now I am coming to live among you – Yahweh declares!" (2: 14). I read and listen to it today; I say it also in my heart, in my life; a joy is announced to me, a new happiness, never before experienced. I rediscover the great things that the Lord has done for me; I experience the freedom that comes from His pardon: I am no longer sentenced, but graced forever; I live the experience of the presence of the Lord next to me, in me. Yes, He has come to dwell in our midst; He is once more setting up His tent in the land of my heart, of my existence. Lord, as the psalm says, You rejoice in Your creatures (Ps 104: 31); and I too rejoice in You, give thanks to You; my joy is in You (Ps 104: 34).

• The Lord is with you

These simple and enlightened words, pronounced by the angel to Mary, release an all-powerful force; I realize that these words alone would suffice to save my life, to lift me up again from whatever fall or humiliation, to bring me back when I go astray. The fact that He, my Lord, is with me, keeps me alive, gives me courage and trust to go on being. If I am, it is because He is with me. Who knows but that the experience of Isaac told in Scripture might not be valid for me, when one day Abimelech came to Isaac with his men to tell him, "It became clear to us that Yahweh was with you" (Gen 26: 28) and then asked to become friends and form an alliance. Would that the same thing might be said of me; would that I could show that the Lord is truly with me, in my life, in my desires, in my affections, in my choices and actions; would that others might meet Him through me. Perhaps for this, it is necessary for me to absorb more of the presence of God, for me to eat and drink of Him.

Let me go to the school of Scripture, to read and re-read some passages where the voice of the Lord tells me again and again of this truth and, while He speaks, to be transformed, ever more in-dwelt. "Remain for the present in that country; I shall be with you and bless you" (Gen 26:3). "To Joshua son of Nun, Yahweh gave this order: Be strong and stand firm, for you are to be the one to bring the Israelites into the country which I

have promised them on oath, and I myself shall be with you" (Deut 31:23). "They will fight against you but will not overcome you, because I am with you to save you and rescue you" (Jer 15:20). "The angel of Yahweh appeared to him and said: Yahweh is with you, valiant warrior!" (Judg 6:12). "Yahweh appeared to him the same night and said, 'I am the God of your father Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I shall bless you and multiply your offspring for My servant Abraham's sake'" (Gen 26:24). "Be sure, I am with you; I shall keep you safe wherever you go, and bring you back to this country, for I shall never desert you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen 28: 15). "Do not be afraid, for I am with you; do not be alarmed, for I am your God. I give you strength, truly I help you, truly I hold you firm with my saving right hand" (Is 41: 10)

- **Do not be afraid**

The Bible is packed with this pronouncement full of kindness; like a river of mercy, these words are found throughout the sacred books, from Genesis to the Apocalypse. It is the Father who repeats to His children not to be afraid, because He is with them; He will not abandon them; He will not forget them; He will not leave them in the hands of their enemies. It is like a declaration of love from God to humanity, to each one of us; it is a pledge of fidelity that is relayed from hand to hand, from heart to heart, and finally comes down to us. Abraham heard these words and after him his son Isaac, then the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon and, with them, Jeremiah and all the prophets. No one is excluded from this embrace of salvation that the Father offers His children, even those farthest from Him, most rebellious against Him. Mary knows how to listen to these words and knows how to believe full of faith, in an attitude of absolute surrender. She listens and believes, welcomes and lives for us too. She is the strong and courageous woman who opens herself to the coming of God, letting go of all fears, incredulity and a closed spirit. She repeats these same words of God in our lives and invites us to believe like her.

- **You enjoy God's favor**

"Lord, if I enjoy favor in your sight...". This is the prayer that time and time again comes out of the lips and hearts of those who seek refuge in the Lord. The Scriptures tell us about such people. We come across them in our crossroads when we know not where to go, when we feel hounded by solitude or by temptation, when we experience abandonment, betrayals, heavy defeats of our own existence. When we no longer have anyone and we fail to find even ourselves, then we too, like them, find ourselves praying by repeating these same words: "Lord, if I enjoy favor in your sight...". Who knows how often we have repeated these words, even alone and in silence. But today, here in this simple passage of the Gospel, we are forestalled, we are welcomed in anticipation; we need no longer plead, because we have already found everything that we always sought and much more. We have received freely. We are overwhelmed and now we can overflow!

- **Nothing is impossible to God**

I have nearly come to the end of this strong journey of grace and liberation; I now come across a word that shakes me in my depths. My faith is being sifted; the Lord is testing me, scrutinizing me, testing my heart. What the angel says here in front of Mary, had already been proclaimed many times in the Old Testament; now the time has come for the fulfilment; now all the impossible things come to pass. God becomes man; the Lord becomes friend, brother; the distant is very close. And I, even I, small and poor as I am, am given to share in the immensity of this gift, this grace; I am told that in my life too the impossible becomes possible. I only have to believe, to give my consent. But this means that I have to allow myself to be shattered by the power of God; to surrender to Him, who will transform me, free me and renew me. Not even this is

impossible. Yes, I can be reborn today, here and now, by the grace of the voice that has spoken to me, that has reached me even to the very depths of my heart. I seek and transcribe the passages of Scripture that repeat this truth. And as I write them, as I re-read them and say them slowly, devouring every word, and what they say takes place in me... Genesis 18: 14; Job 42: 2; Jeremiah 32: 17; Jeremiah 32: 27; Zechariah 8: 6; Matthew 19: 26; Luke 18: 27.

• Here I am

Now I cannot escape, nor can I avoid the conclusion. I knew from the beginning that here, in this word, so small and yet so full, so final, that God was waiting for me. The appointment of love, of the covenant between Him and me had been fixed precisely on this word, just a gentle voice, just a kiss. I am unsettled by the richness of the presence I feel in this "Here I am!"; I need not make much effort to recall the number of times that God first pronounced and repeated these words to me. He is the 'Here I am' made man, absolutely faithful, unforgettable. I only need to tune into Him, only find His footprints in the sand of my poverty, of my desert; I only need to welcome His infinite love that never ceases to seek me, to stay close to me, to walk with me wherever I go. The "Here I am" has already been pronounced and realized. It is already real. How many before me and how many today have experienced this! I am not alone. I still remain silent, listening before I reply...

"Here I am!" (Is 65:1) God repeats; Mary replies, "Here I am, I am the servant of the Lord"; and Christ says, "I come to do Your will" (Ps 39: 8)

A Time of Prayer: Psalm 138

Father, into Your hands I commend my life. Yahweh, You examine me and know me, You know when I sit, when I rise, You understand my thoughts from afar.

You watch when I walk or lie down, You know every detail of my conduct. A word is not yet on my tongue before You, Yahweh, know all about it. You fence me in, behind and in front, You have laid Your hand upon me. Such amazing knowledge is beyond me, a height to which I cannot attain. Where shall I go to escape Your spirit?

Where shall I flee from Your presence?

If I scale the heavens You are there, if I lie flat in Sheol, there You are.

You created my inmost self, knit me together in my mother's womb. For so many marvels I thank You; a wonder am I, and all Your works are wonders. You knew me through and through, How hard for me to grasp Your thoughts, how many, God, there are! If I count them, they are more than the grains of sand; if I come to an end, I am still with You. God, examine me and know my heart, test me and know my concerns. Make sure that I am not on my way to ruin, and guide me on the road to eternity.

Closing Prayer

Father, You came down to me; You have come to me; You have touched my heart; You have spoken to me and promised joy, presence and salvation. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, who overshadows me, I, together with Mary, have been able to say to You yes, the "Here I am" of my life for you. Now there remains only the force of Your promise, of Your truth: "You are to conceive and bear Jesus." Lord, here is the womb of my life, of my being, of all that I am and have, open before You. I place all things in You, in Your heart. Enter, come, come down again, I beg You, and make me fruitful, make me one who gives birth to Christ in this world. May the overflowing love I receive from You find

its fullness and truth in touching the brothers and sisters that You place beside me. May our meeting, Father, be open, a gift to all. May Jesus be the Savior. Amen.

Tuesday, April 9, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

All praise and thanks be to you, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. You have given us your risen Son to be alive in our communities.

Make us see him with eyes of faith, that he may unite us, heart and soul. May his dynamic presence among us move us to become with him, each other's bread of life, that no one among us may hunger for food or help when in need.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 3: 7b-15

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "You must be born from above. The wind blows where it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." "How is that possible?" asked Nicodemus.

Jesus replied, "You are the Teacher of Israel, and you do not know these things! In all truth I tell you, we speak only about what we know and witness only to what we have seen and yet you people reject our evidence. If you do not believe me when I speak to you about earthly things, how will you believe me when I speak to you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of man; as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Reflection

Today's Gospel speaks about the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus had heard people speak about the things Jesus did, and he was struck, surprised. He wishes to speak with Jesus in order to be able to understand better. He thought he knew the things of God. He lived with the booklet of the past in his hand to see if this agreed with the novelty announced by Jesus. In the conversation, Jesus says that the only way in which Nicodemus could understand the things of God was to be born again! Sometimes we are like Nicodemus: we only accept as something new what is in agreement with our old ideas. Other times, we allow ourselves to be surprised by facts and we are not afraid to say: "I am born anew!"

When the Evangelists recall the last words of Jesus, they have before them the problems of the communities for which they write. The questions of Nicodemus to Jesus are a reflection of the questions of the communities of Asia Minor at the end of the first century. For this reason, the answers of Jesus to Nicodemus were, at the same time, a response to the problems of those communities. At that time, the Christians followed the catechesis in this way. Most probably, the account of the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus formed part of the Baptismal catechesis, because he says that the persons have to be reborn from water and the Spirit (Jn 3: 6).

- John 3: 7b-8 - Born from above, born anew, again, and born of the Spirit. In Greek, the same word means anew, again and from above. Jesus had said: “No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit” (Jn 3: 5). And he adds “What is born of human nature, is human (flesh); what is born of the Spirit is Spirit” (Jn 3: 6). Here “flesh” means that which is born only from our own ideas. What is born from us has our own mark, our own measure. To be born of the Spirit is another thing! And Jesus, once again reaffirms what he had said before: One has to be born from above (born again) That is, one must be reborn of the Spirit who comes from above. And he explains that the Spirit is like the wind. Both in Hebrew and in Greek, the same word is used to say spirit and wind. Jesus says, “The wind blows where it pleases; you can hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.” So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. The wind has within it a direction. We are aware of the direction of the wind, for example, the wind of the North and the wind of the South, but we do not know nor do we control the cause why the wind moves in one direction or another. The Spirit is like this. No one is the master of the Spirit (Qc 8: 8). That which best characterizes the wind, the Spirit, is liberty. The wind, the Spirit, is free, it cannot be controlled. It acts on others and nobody can act on it. Its origin is the mystery; its destiny is the mystery. The fisherman has, in the first place, to discover the direction of the wind. Then he should place the sails according to that direction. This is what Nicodemus should do and what all of us should do.
- John 3: 9 - Question of Nicodemus: How is that possible? Jesus does nothing more than summarize what the Old Testament taught concerning the action of the Spirit, of the holy wind, in the life of the People of God and which Nicodemus, Teacher and Doctor, should know. And just the same, Nicodemus is frightened in hearing Jesus’ response and acts as if he was ignorant: “How is that possible?”
- John 3: 10-15 - The answer of Jesus: Faith comes from witness and not from the miracle. Jesus changes the question: –You are the Teacher of Israel and you do not know these things? Because for Jesus, if persons believe only when things are according to their own arguments and ideas, then the faith is not perfect. Faith is perfect when it is the faith of one who believes because of the witness. He leaves aside his own arguments and gives himself, because he believes in the one giving witness.

Personal Questions

- Have you had some experience in which you have had the impression of being born again? How was it?
- Jesus compares the action of the Holy Spirit with the wind. What does this comparison of the action of the Spirit of God reveal in our life? Have you already placed the sails of your life according to the direction of the wind of the Spirit?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is near to the broken-hearted, he helps those whose spirit is crushed. Though hardships without number beset the upright, Yahweh brings rescue from them all. (Ps 34: 18-19)

Wednesday, April 10, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

you loved the world - that is us - so much that you gave us your only Son to save us from ourselves and to give us eternal life. Do not condemn us, Lord, do not leave us to ourselves and to our little schemes but give us your Son now to stay with us and to make love and justice and peace ever new realities among us, your people reborn in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 3: 16-21

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "For this is how God loved the world: he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.

No one who believes in him will be judged; but whoever does not believe is judged already, because that person does not believe in the Name of God's only Son. And the judgement is this: though the light has come into the world people have preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, to prevent his actions from being shown up; but whoever does the truth comes out into the light, so that what he is doing may plainly appear as done in God."

Reflection

- John's Gospel is like a fabric or cloth made of three different threads, but similar. The three of them are so well combined with one another that, sometimes, it is not possible to understand when one goes from one thread to the other. (a) The first thread are the facts and words of Jesus during the thirty years, preserved by the eye-witnesses who kept the things which Jesus did and taught. (b) The second thread are the facts of the life of the community. Because of their faith in Jesus and convinced of his presence among them, the communities enlightened their path with the words and the gestures of Jesus. This has some incidence or impact on the description of the facts. For example, the conflict of the communities with the Pharisees at the end of the first century marks the way of describing the conflicts of Jesus with the Pharisees. (c) The comments made by the Evangelist are the third thread. In some passages it is difficult to perceive when Jesus ceases to speak and the Evangelist begins to weave his own comments. The text of today's Gospel, for example, is a beautiful and profound reflection of the Evangelist on the action of Jesus. The people can hardly perceive the difference between when Jesus speaks and when the Evangelist does. In any case, both of them are Word of God.
- John 3, 16: God loved the world. The word world is one of those words used more frequently in the Gospel of John: 78 times! It has several meanings. In the first place world may signify the earth, the space inhabited by human beings (Jn 11, 9; 21, 25) or also the created universe (Jn 17, 5.24) World can also mean the persons who inhabit this earth, all of humanity (Jn 1, 9; 3, 16; 4, 42; 6, 14; 8, 12). It can also mean a large group,

a numerous group of persons, as when we speak of —the whole world (Jn 12, 19; 14, 27). Here, in our text the word world also has the sense of humanity, all the human beings. God so loves humanity that he gave his only Son. The one who accepts that God reaches down to us in Jesus, has already passed through death and has eternal life.

- John 3: 17-19 - The true sense of judgment. The image of God which appears in the three verses is that of a Father full of tenderness and not of a severe judgment. God sends his Son not to judge and condemn the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him. The one who believes in Jesus and accepts him as the revelation of God is not judged, because he is already accepted by God. And the one who does not believe in Jesus has already been judged. He excludes himself. And the Evangelist repeats what he had already said in the Prologue: many persons do not want to accept Jesus, because his light reveals the evil which exists in them (cf. Jn 1: 5, 10-11).
- John 3: 20-21 - To practice truth: In every human being, there is a divine seed, a trait of the Creator. Jesus, the revelation of the Father, is a response to this deepest desire of the human being. The one, who wants to be faithful to what he has deepest in him, accepts Jesus. It is difficult to find a broader ecumenical vision than the one expressed in these three verses in the Gospel of John.
- To complete the significance of the word world in the Fourth Gospel. Other times the word world means that part of humanity opposed to Jesus and to his message. There the word world assumes the meaning of —enemies or —opponents (Jn 7: 4, 7; 8: 23, 26; 9: 39; 12: 25). This world which is contrary to the practice of the liberty of Jesus, is directed by the enemy or Satan, also called the —prince of this world (Jn 14: 30; 16: 11). It represents the Roman Empire and, at the same time, also those responsible of the Jews who driving out the followers of Jesus from the Synagogue. This world persecutes and kills the communities causing tribulations to the faithful (Jn 16: 33). Jesus will liberate them, conquering the prince of this world (Jn 12: 31). Therefore, world means a situation of injustice, of oppression, which generates hatred and persecution against the communities of the Beloved Disciple. The persecutors are those persons who have the power, the leaders, both of the Empire and of the Synagogue. Lastly, all those who practice injustice using for this the name of God (Jn 16: 2). The hope which the Gospel gives to the persecuted communities is that Jesus is stronger than the world. This is why he says: —In the world you will have hardship, but be courageous, I have conquered the world! (Jn 16: 33).

Personal Questions

- God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Has this truth penetrated in the depth of your heart, of your conscience?
- The more ecumenical truth that exists is the life which God has given us and for which he has given his only Son. How do I live Ecumenism in my daily life?

Concluding Prayer

I will bless Yahweh at all times, his praise continually on my lips. I will praise Yahweh from my heart; let the humble hear and rejoice. (Ps 34: 1-2)

Thursday, April 11, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

your Son Jesus Christ came from you and bore witness to the things he had heard and seen. He could not but bear witness to you.

Give us the Spirit of your Son, we pray you, to speak your word and to live it, that we may show Christ, your living Word, to those who have not seen him.

We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 3: 31-36

John the Baptist said to his disciples: "He who comes from above is above all others; he who is of the earth is earthly himself and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven bears witness to the things he has seen and heard, but his testimony is not accepted by anybody; though anyone who does accept his testimony is attesting that God is true, since he whom God has sent speaks God's own words, for God gives him the Spirit without reserve.

The Father loves the Son and has entrusted everything to his hands. Anyone who believes in the Son has eternal life, but anyone who refuses to believe in the Son will never see life: God's retribution hangs over him.

Reflection

During the month of January we meditated on John 3, 22-30, which shows us the last witness of John the Baptist concerning Jesus. It was a response given by him to his disciples, in which he reaffirms that he, John, is not the Messiah, but rather his precursor (Jn 3, 28). On that occasion, John says that beautiful phrase which summarizes his witness: -It is necessary that he grows greater and I grow less! This phrase is the program for all those who want to follow Jesus.

The verses of today's Gospel are, again, a comment of the Evangelist in order to help the communities to understand better all the importance of the things that Jesus did and taught. Here, we have another indication of those three threads of which we spoke about before.

- John 3: 31-33 - A refrain which is always repeated. Throughout the Gospel of John, many times there appears the conflict between Jesus and the Jews who contest the words of Jesus. Jesus speaks of what he hears from the Father. He is total transparency. His enemies, not opening themselves to God and because they cling to their own ideas here on earth, are not capable to understand the deep significance of the things that Jesus lives, does and says. In last instance, this is the evil one which pushes the Jews to arrest and condemn Jesus.
- John 3: 34: Jesus gives us the Spirit without reserve. John's Gospel uses many images and symbols to signify the action of the Spirit. Like in the Creation (Gen 1: 1), in the same way the Spirit descends on Jesus -like a dove, come from Heaven! (Jn 1: 32). It is the beginning of the new creation! Jesus repeats the words of God and

communicates the Spirit to us without reserve (Jn 3: 34). His words are Spirit and life (Jn 6: 63). When Jesus is about to leave this earth, he says that he will send another Consoler, another defender, to be with us forever (Jn 14: 16-17). By his Passion, Death and Resurrection, Jesus obtains for us the gift of the Spirit. Through Baptism all of us have received this same Spirit of Jesus (Jn 1: 33). When he appears to the apostles, he breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit!" (Jn 20: 22). The Spirit is like the water which springs from the persons who believe in Jesus (Jn 7: 37-39; 4: 14). The first effect of the action of the Spirit in us is reconciliation: "If you forgive anyone's sins they will be forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained!" (Jn 20: 23). The Spirit is given to us to recall and understand the full significance of the words of Jesus (Jn 14: 26; 16: 12-13). Animated by the Spirit of Jesus we can adore God in any place (Jn 4: 23-24). Here is fulfilled the liberty of the Spirit of which Saint Paul speaks: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3: 17)

- John 3: 35-36 - The Father loves the Son. He reaffirms the identity between the Father and Jesus. The Father loves the Son and places all things in his hand. Saint Paul will say that the fullness of the divinity dwells in Jesus (Col 1: 19; 2: 9). This is why the one who accepts Jesus and believes in Jesus has eternal life, because God is life. The one who does not accept to believe in Jesus, places himself outside.

Personal Questions

- Jesus communicates the Spirit to us, without reserve. Have you had some experience of this action of the Spirit in your life?
- He who believes in Jesus has eternal life. How does this take place today in the life of the families and of the communities?

Concluding Prayer

Proclaim with me the greatness of Yahweh, let us acclaim his name together.

Taste and see that Yahweh is good. How blessed are those who take refuge in him. (Ps 34: 3, 8)

Friday, April 12, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, your Son Jesus fed those who followed him in the desert and they received as much as they wanted.

May we know and be convinced that he can fill our own emptiness not just with gifts that fill our need of the moment but with himself, and may we accept him eagerly, for he is our Lord forever.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 1-15

After this, Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee - or of Tiberias - and a large crowd followed him, impressed by the signs he had done in curing the sick. Jesus climbed the hillside and sat down there with his disciples.

The time of the Jewish Passover was near. Looking up, Jesus saw the crowds approaching and said to Philip, "Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?" He said this only to put Philip to the test; he himself knew exactly what he was going to do. Philip answered, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough to give them a little piece each." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said, "Here is a small boy with five barley loaves and two fish; but what is that among so many?" Jesus said to them, "Make the people sit down." There was plenty of grass there, and as many as five thousand men sat down.

Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were sitting there; he then did the same with the fish, distributing as much as they wanted. When they had eaten enough he said to the disciples, "Pick up the pieces left over, so that nothing is wasted." So they picked them up and filled twelve large baskets with scraps left over from the meal of five barley loaves.

Seeing the sign that he had done, the people said, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, as he realized they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, fled back to the hills alone.

Reflection

- The reading of the IV Chapter of John begins today which places before us two signs or miracles: the multiplication of the loaves (Jn 6: 1-15) and walking on the water (Jn 6: 16-21). Then the long dialogue on the Bread of Life is mentioned (Jn 6: 22-71). John places this fact close to the feast of the Passover (Jn 6: 4). The central approach is the confrontation between the old Passover of the Exodus and the new Passover which takes place in Jesus. The dialogue on the bread of life will clarify the new Passover which takes place in Jesus.
- John 6: 1-4 - The situation. In the ancient Passover, the multitude crossed the Red Sea. In the new Passover, Jesus crosses the Sea of Galilee. A great crowd follows Moses. A great crowd follows Jesus in this new exodus. In the first exodus, Moses goes up to the Mountain. Jesus, the new Moses, also goes up to the mountain. The crowds followed Moses who presents great signs. The crowds follow Jesus because they had seen the signs that he worked in favor of the sick.
- John 6: 5-7 - Jesus and Philip. Seeing the multitude, Jesus confronts the disciples with the hunger of the people and asks Philip: "Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?" In the first exodus, Moses had obtained food for the hungry people. Jesus, the new Moses, will do the same thing. But Philip, instead of looking at the situation in the light of the Scripture, he looked at it according to the system and replies: "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough!" One denarius was the minimum salary for one day. Philip is aware of the problem and recognizes his total incapacity to solve it. He complains but presents no solution.
- John 6: 8-9 - Andrew and the boy. Andrew, instead of complaining, seeks a solution. He finds a boy who has five loaves of bread and two fish: Five barley loaves and two fish were the daily ration of the meal of the poor. The boy hands over his daily ration of food! He could have said: "Five loaves of bread and two fish, what is this for all these people? It will serve nothing! Let us divide all this among ourselves," between two or three persons, but instead, he has the courage to give the five loaves of bread

and the two fish to feed 5000 persons (Jn 6, 10! One who does this, either he is a fool or has much faith, believing that out of love for Jesus, all are ready to divide their food as the boy did!

- John 6: 10-11 - The multiplication. Jesus asks the people to sit down on the ground. Then he multiplies the food, the ration of the poor. The text says: "Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were sitting there; he then did the same with the fish, distributing as much as they wanted." With this phrase, written in the year 100 after Christ, John recalls the gesture of the Last Supper (1 Co 11: 23-24). The Eucharist, when it is celebrated as it should be, will lead the persons to share as it impelled the boy to give all his ration of food to be shared.
- John 6: 12-13 - The twelve baskets of what was left over. Number twelve evokes the totality of the people with their twelve tribes. John does not say if fish were also left over. He is interested in recalling the bread as a symbol of the Eucharist. The Gospel of John does not have the description of the Eucharistic Supper, but describes the multiplication of the loaves, symbol of what would happen in the communities through the celebration of the Eucharistic Supper. If among the Christian people there was a true and proper sharing, there would be abundant food and twelve baskets would be left over for many other people!
- John 6: 14-15 - They want to make him king. The people interpret the gesture of Jesus saying: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!" The peoples' intuition is just. Jesus in fact, is the new Moses, the Messiah, the one whom the people were expecting (Dt 18, 15-19). But this intuition had been deviated by the ideology of the time which wanted a great king who would be strong and a dominator. This is why, seeing the sign, the people proclaim Jesus the Messiah and ask to make him King! Jesus perceived what could happen, and he withdraws and goes to the mountain alone. He does not accept this way of being Messiah and waits for the opportune moment to help the people to advance a step farther.

Personal Questions

- In the face of the problem of hunger in the world, do you act as Philip, as Andrew or like the boy?
- The people wanted a Messiah who would be a strong and powerful king. Today, many follow populist leaders. What does today's Gospel tell us about this?

Concluding Prayer

Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear? Yahweh is the fortress of my life, whom should I dread? (Ps 27: 1)

Saturday, April 13, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord God,

also in our day we need men and women filled with the Spirit of love and service who are attentive to the needs of people. Let them listen even to the unspoken cries of people too timid to voice their poverty and distress and help without condescension their brothers and sisters of Christ, for he is our Lord forever.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 16-21

That evening the disciples went down to the shore of the sea and got into a boat to make for Capernaum on the other side of the sea. It was getting dark by now and Jesus had still not rejoined them. The wind was strong, and the sea was getting rough.

They had rowed three or four miles when they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming towards the boat. They were afraid, but he said, "It's me. Don't be afraid." They were ready to take him into the boat, and immediately it reached the shore at the place they were making for.

Reflection

Today's Gospel narrates the episode of the boat on the agitated sea. Jesus is on the *mountain*, the disciples in the *sea* and the people on the *land*. In the way of describing the facts, John tries to help the communities to discover the mystery which envelopes the person of Jesus. He does it by recalling texts from the Old Testament which refer to the Exodus.

At the time when John wrote, the small boat of the communities had to face a contrary wind both on the part of the converted Jews who wanted to reduce the mystery of Jesus to prophecies and figures of the Old Testament, and on the part of some converted Pagans who thought that it was possible to have an alliance between Jesus and the Empire.

- John 6: 15: Jesus on the mountain. In the face of the multiplication of the loaves, the people conclude that Jesus is the awaited Messiah, because according to the hope of the people of the time, the Messiah would have repeated the gesture of Moses: feeding the people in the desert. For this reason, according to the official ideology, the crowds thought that Jesus was the Messiah, and, because of this, they wanted to make him King (cf. Jn 6: 14-15). This request of the people was a temptation for Jesus as well as for the disciples. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus obliges the disciples to get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side of the lake (Mk 6: 45). He wanted to avoid that they get contaminated with the dominating ideology. This is a sign that the —yeast of Herod and of the Pharisees, was very strong (Mk 8: 15). Jesus faces the temptation with prayer on the mountain.
- John 6: 16-18: The situation of the disciples. It was already night. The disciples went down near the sea; they got into the boat and directed themselves toward Capernaum, on the other side of the sea. John says that it was already dark and that Jesus had not arrived as yet. On the one hand he recalls the Exodus: to cross the sea in the midst of difficulties. On the other, he recalls the situation of the communities in the Roman Empire: with the disciples, they were living in the dark, with a contrary wind and the sea was agitated and Jesus seemed to be absent!
- John 6: 19-20. Change of the situation. Jesus reaches them walking on the water of the sea of life. The disciples are afraid. As it happens in the account of the story of Emmaus, they did not recognize him (Lk 24: 28). Jesus gets close to them and says: "It is me! Do not be afraid!" For those who know the story of the Old Testament, here again he recalls some very important facts:

- (a) He recalls the crowd, protected by God, crossed the Red Sea without fear.
- (b) He recalls that God, when calling Moses, he declares his name saying: “I am!” (cf. Ex 3: 15).
- (c) He recalls also the Book of Isaiah which presents the return from exile as a new Exodus, in which God appears repeating many times: —I am!” (cf. Is 42: 8; 43: 5, 11-13; 44: 6, 25; 45: 5-7).
- For the People of the Bible, the sea was the symbol of the abyss, of chaos, of evil (Apoc 13: 1). In Exodus the People goes across toward liberty, facing and conquering the sea. God divides the sea with his breath and the crowds cross the sea which is dry land. (Ex 14: 22). In other passages the Bible shows God who conquers the sea (Gen 1: 6-10; Ps 104: 6-9; Prov 8: 27). To conquer the sea means to impose one’s own limits and to prevent that it swallows all the earth with its waves. In this passage Jesus reveals his divinity by dominating and conquering the sea, preventing the boat and his disciples to be carried away by the waves. This way of evoking or recalling the Old Testament, of using the Bible, helped the communities to perceive better the presence of God in Jesus and in the facts of life. Do not be afraid!
- John 6: 22. They reached the desired port. They want to take Jesus into the boat, but it was not necessary, because the boat touched the shore to which they had directed themselves. They reached the desired port. The Psalm says: “He reduced the storm to calm, and all the waters subsided. He brought them overjoyed at the stillness, to the port where they were bound” (Ps 107: 29-30).

Personal Questions

- On the mountain: Why does Jesus seek to be alone to pray after the multiplication of the loaves? Which is the result of his prayer?
- Is it possible today to walk on the water of the sea of life? How?

Concluding Prayer

Shout for joy, you upright; praise comes well from the honest. Give thanks to Yahweh on the lyre, play for him on the ten-stringed lyre. (Ps 33: 1-2)

Sunday, April 14, 2024

Third Sunday of Easter

Opening Prayer

Shaddai, God of the mountain, You who make of our fragile life the rock of your dwelling place, lead our mind to strike the rock of the desert, so that water may gush to quench our thirst.

May the poverty of our feelings cover us as with a mantle in the darkness of the night and may it open our heart to hear the echo of silence until the dawn, wrapping us with the light of the new morning, may bring us, with the spent embers of the fire of the shepherds of the Absolute who have kept vigil for us close to the divine Master, the flavor of the holy memory.

Lectio

The Text: Luke 24: 35-48

³⁵ On their way back from Emmaus the two disciples told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread. ³⁶ As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you." ³⁷ But they were startled and frightened and supposed that they saw a spirit. ³⁸ And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? ³⁹ See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." ⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹ And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate before them. ⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶ and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

A Moment of Silence:

Let us allow the sound of the Word to echo within us.

Meditatio

A Few Questions:

- It happened that along the way, they recognized him: How many are the occasions of grace along the way of our existence? Do we recognize him as he breaks the bread of the moment with us in the inn at evening time?
- Jesus himself among them. Look and touch: It is really I! Do we touch with our hands the gifts of freedom in the person of the living Christ and in the breaking of our togetherness?
- Startled and frightened they supposed they were seeing a spirit: Which God attracts us? Is it the God of the unforeseen who is always beyond our little world, or is it the "spirit" God of our all-powerful desire?
- They still disbelieved for joy: Is joy our walking stick on the journey? Is the sense of expectation alive in us or do we move in the shadow of resigning ourselves to our fate?
- He opened their minds to understand the scriptures: Where is the creature image in our seeking? Have we made of Scripture nostalgia for a Word abandoned like the breeze of eternal Love among the branches of human suffering?

A Key to the Reading:

The idea of a journey in Luke, mirrors well the theological itinerary of the journey of the intervention of grace in human events. John prepares the way for the Lord who is to come (Lk 1: 76) and cries to level his ways (Lk 3: 4); Mary goes out and hurries towards the mountains (Lk 1: 39); Jesus, God's way (Lk 20: 21), walks with human beings and marks the way of peace (Lk 1: 79) and of life (Acts 2: 28), walking the way himself first by

his very existence. After the resurrection he continues the journey together with the disciples (Lk 24: 32) and remains the protagonist on the journey of the Church that identifies itself with his journey (Acts 18: 25). The whole *raison d'être* of the Church lies in this journey of salvation (Acts 16: 17) that leads to God (Acts 18: 2). She is called to live the way and to point it out to all so that everyone may leave his/her way (Acts 14: 16) and walk towards the Lord who walks with those who belong to him.

- **v. 35.** Then, going back from Emmaus, the two disciples explained what had happened on the road and how they had recognized the Lord when he broke the bread. The experience of meeting with Life, allows one to go back on one's tracks. This is not the going back of remorse or that of regret. It is the going back of one who re-reads his/her own story and knows that s/he will find, along the road, the place of one's record. We meet God in events. It is he who comes to meet us and walks beside us on the road, which is often dry and barren with things unfinished. God reveals himself through the familiar gestures of an experience long relished. These are the furrows of the already accomplished that welcome the novelty of a today without sunset. People are called to welcome the new presence of God on one's road where God reveals himself in the basic signs of a Christian community life: the Scriptures, read in a Christological light, and the breaking of the bread (Lk 24: 1-33). The history of humankind, privileged space for God's action, is the history of salvation that is inherent in all human situations and throughout the centuries in a kind of perennial exodus, full of the newness of the proclamation.
- **v. 36.** While the two were telling them this, suddenly the Lord himself stood among them and said: "Peace be with you!". Luke wisely weaves the events in order to give a foundation and continuity to the history of salvation. The seeds proclaimed would flower and the atmosphere of newness, which blows gently through the pages of these events, form a basis for the development of a *memoria Dei* that crops up from time to time. Jesus returns to those who belong to him. He stands in their midst, himself, complete, as before, even though in a different manner that is now definitive. He manifests himself in his glorious bodily form to show that the resurrection is something that really happened.
- **v. 37.** Startled and frightened they supposed they were seeing a spirit. The disciples' reaction does not seem to fit in well with the preceding story since they already believed in the resurrection on the word of Peter (v. 34). Their confusion, however, does not concern the conviction that Jesus is risen, but concerns the bodily nature of the risen Jesus. Thus, there is no contradiction in the narrative. It was necessary for the disciples to experience intensely the bodily reality of the resurrection of Jesus for them to carry out adequately their future mission of witnessing to the good news and of clarifying ideas on the Risen One: they did not think it was Jesus himself, but supposed they were seeing a spirit.
- **vv. 38-40.** But he said to them: "Why are you alarmed? Why are these doubts coming up in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet, and see that it is I myself. Feel me, and you will know, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you can see I have". He said this and showed them his hands and his feet. The Jesus of Luke's Gospel is almost a hero who meets his fate with certainty and the few shadows there are, serve only to underscore and emphasize the fullness of his being. Luke had recalled the humble origins and the genealogy, quite common and devoid of prestigious persons, a crowd of obscure people from whom the figure of the Christ sprang. In the turmoil and doubt of the disciples after the resurrection, it is clear that Jesus is not the Savior of the great, but of all, startled and frightened though they may be. He, the protagonist in the journey of the Church, walks the human paths of disbelief in order to heal them with faith, and continues to walk in time, showing his hands and feet in the flesh and bones of believers.

- **vv. 41-42.** They still could not believe, they were so full of joy and wonder; so he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of cooked fish, which he took and ate in their presence. Every invitation to sit at table, includes the desire for intimacy; it is a remaining, a sharing. The resurrection does not take away from Jesus the possibility of presenting himself as the place for sharing. That cooked fish, for years eaten together with his disciples, continues to be a means of communion. A fish cooked in love for each other; a food that does not cease to reassure the hidden hunger of humankind, a food capable of refuting the illusion of something that comes to an end among the ruins of the past.
- **v. 44.** Then he said to them: "These are the very things I told you about while I was still with you: everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms had to come true." The moments of anxiety, of emotion, of tears for the nation (Lk 19:41), the exertion of going up to Jerusalem, the temptations, all these had defined the eternal border between humiliation-hiding and affirmation- glory focused in the various phases of Jesus' human life in the light of the Father's will. Bitterness, obscurity and suffering had nourished the Savior's heart: "I have a baptism to receive, and how distressed I am until it is over!" (Lk 12: 50). Now the work of grace is visible because through the working of the Spirit, the eschaton, already accomplished in Christ and in the believer, creates an atmosphere of praise, a climate of joy and deep peace, typical of things accomplished. The Parousia will mark the end of the salvific journey, a time of consolation and restoration of all things (Acts 3: 21).
- **v. 45.** Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. The faith of the apostles in the resurrection is the hermeneutic key for an interpretation of the Scriptures and the basis of the paschal proclamation. The Bible is fulfilled in Christ, in him it is unified in his prophetic value and in him it acquires its full meaning. Human beings cannot of themselves understand the Word of God. The presence of the Risen One opens the mind to a full understanding of the Mystery hidden in the sacred words concerning human existence.
- **v. 45-47.** "This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later, and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations beginning in Jerusalem." In Luke salvation touches all the human dimensions through the working of Christ who saves from evil, who frees from darkness (Acts 26: 18) and from sin (Lk 5: 20-26; Acts 2: 38), from disease and from suffering, from death, from disbelief and from idols; who realizes human life in the community being of God, happy fraternity of love; who does not leave us orphans but is always present with his Spirit from on high (Acts 2: 2). The radical salvation of humankind lies in freeing hearts of stone and in receiving a new heart, which implies a dynamism that frees from every form of slavery (Lk 4: 16-22). God guides history; it is he who evangelizes and guides the journey of those who belong to him. The evangelist of great horizons - from Adam to the kingdom, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth - he is also the evangelist of everyday events. The historical-eschatological process is taking place through which concrete history is accomplished transcending human history and Jesus goes on offering salvation through his Spirit who creates witnesses capable of prophecy and of diffusing salvation until the time when Christ will return (Lk 21: 28) when the complete freedom of humankind will be manifest. In Acts 2: 37 we find a resume of the whole *iter salutis* suggested here: to welcome the word, to be converted, believe, be baptized, and obtain pardon of sins and the gift of the Spirit. The word of salvation, word of grace, unfurls its power in the heart of one who listens (Lk 8: 4-15), and the invocation of the Name of the Savior seals salvation in the one converted to the faith. The action of Jesus through the Spirit, made present by the mediation of the Church

(Acts 9: 3-5), complements the action accomplished through the Church to whom he himself refers as in the call of Paul (Acts 9: 6-18).

- **v. 48.** You are witnesses of these things. The Christian community, called to map the journey of witnessing in human history, proclaims by word and deed the fulfilment of the kingdom of God among human beings and the presence of the Lord Jesus who continues to work as Messiah, Lord and prophet in his Church. The Church will grow and walk in the fear of the Lord, full of the consolation of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9: 31). This is a journey of service, meant to echo the Word of salvation in the furthest ends of the earth (Acts 1: 1-11). Gradually the journey goes further away from Jerusalem and goes to the heart of the pagan world. When it reaches Rome, capital of empire, Luke will put his signature to his evangelizing steps. No one will be excluded in the process. All are meant to receive salvation, especially sinners for whose conversion there is great joy in heaven (Lk 15: 7, 10). Like Mary, who for Luke is the model of the disciple who walks in the Lord, believers are called to be completely transformed in order to live the messianic motherhood, whatever one's own "virginal" state, which is an expression of the poverty of being creature (Lk 1: 30-35). The yes of the Magnificat is the way to go. We walk carrying within ourselves the word of salvation; we walk in faith, trusting in God who keeps his promises; we walk in the joy of Him who makes us blessed, not through any merit of ours but in humility of life. May Mary's itinerary be ours: to go, carried by the Spirit, towards our brothers and sisters, taking with us as our only luggage the saving Word: Christ the Lord (Acts 3: 6).

Reflection:

In his meeting with people, Jesus offered his benevolent presence and waited for the seed of the word and of faith to sprout. When the apostles abandoned him, when Peter denied him, when the sinful woman loved him, when the Pharisees were closed to him, he was neither scandalized nor perturbed. He knew that what he had said and suggested to them would not be lost ... and, indeed, after Pentecost these same people go before the Sanhedrin without fear to say that it is necessary to obey God rather than human beings, Peter preaches openly even to dying on a cross like his Master, the women are sent as witnesses of the resurrection to the apostles and a Pharisee son of Pharisees, Paul of Tarsus, becomes the apostle of the gentiles.

If you, man or woman, cannot avoid living daily the death of yourself, you must not, however, forget that the resurrection is hidden in your wounds to make you live in him, even now. In your neighbor, who may be for you sepulcher of death and mud, a cursed cross, you will find new life. Yes, because the risen Christ will assume the semblance of your neighbor: a gardener, a traveler, a spirit, a person on the bank of a lake ... When you can welcome the "challenge" of Pilate that echoes through the centuries and not accept the exchange suggested (Jn 18: 39-40) because you will have learnt in the nights of forsakenness that you cannot barter your brigand's life with the life of Jesus, the only begotten son of the living God, the Lord of life and death, you who wear unworthily his name: *Bar-Abba*, son of the Father ... then you too will shout like Thomas, the apostle, in the wonder of faith: "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20: 28), my God and my all, and the beauty of your joy will never set on the horizon of your day."

Oratio

Lord, we seek you and wish to see your face:

one day when the veil will be removed, we shall be able to contemplate you.

We seek you in the Scriptures that speak of you: under the veil of wisdom we welcome the cross, your gift to all. We seek you in the radiant faces of our brothers and sisters: we see you in the marks of your passion on their suffering bodies. It is not our eyes, but our heart that sees you: in the light of hope we hope to meet you and speak to you.

Contemplatio

Lord, give us the perseverance to walk towards the summits, in the light of the only Word that saves. As blood brother or sister, the Blood that makes us all brothers and sisters, I remain here, near the tomb of every interior death to set out like a traveler on the paths of no feeling and come to the paths of friendship and meeting. Today, I would like to share the wonder of human love, the joy of wonderful people who live near me not on the edge of their existence, but in their open secrets, where their hearts embrace the Absolute of God. Thank you for giving me his risen face and for your heart enamored of Life and kissed by the Eternal. Thank you for your freedom of explorer that immerses itself in the depths of the Essential. God of the desert that becomes garden, may I always be a small flame lit in the darkness of human endeavor, a heat that spreads where the cold winds of evil destroy and diminish the horizons of Truth and Beauty, that tells the world of the wonderful adventure of risen human love, the love that knows how to die in order to incarnate the smile of God. Amen.

Monday, April 15, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Our living God,

we hunger for lasting life and happiness and the fulfilment of all our hopes. Satisfy all our hungers through your Son Jesus Christ, who is our bread of life. And when he has filled us with himself, may he lead and strengthen us to bring to a waiting world the food of reconciliation and joy, which you alone can give to the full. We ask this thorough Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 22-29

Next day, the crowd that had stayed on the other side saw that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that the disciples had set off by themselves. Other boats, however, had put in from Tiberias, near the place where the bread had been eaten.

When the people saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into those boats and crossed to Capernaum to look for Jesus. When they found him on the other side, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

Jesus answered: "In all truth I tell you, you are looking for me not because you have seen the signs but because you had all the bread you wanted to eat. Do not work for food that goes bad, but work for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you, for on him the Father, God himself, has set his seal."

Then they said to him, "What must we do if we are to carry out God's work?" Jesus gave them this answer, "This is carrying out God's work: you must believe in the one he has sent."

Reflection

In today's Gospel we begin the Discourse on the Bread of Life (Jn 6: 22-71), which is extended during the next six days, until the end of the week. After the multiplication of the loaves, the people follow Jesus. They had seen the miracle; they had eaten and were satiated and wanted more! They were not concerned about looking for the sign or the call of God that was contained in all of this. When the people found Jesus in the Synagogue of Capernaum, he had a long conversation with them, called the Discourse of the Bread of Life. It is not really a Discourse, but it treats of a series of seven brief dialogues which explain the meaning of the multiplication of the bread, symbol of the new Exodus and of the Eucharistic Supper.

It is good to keep in mind the division of the chapter in order to understand better its significance:

- 6: 1-15 - the great multiplication of the loaves
- 6: 16-21 - he crossing of the lake, and Jesus who walks on the water
- 6: 22-71 - the dialogue of Jesus with the people, with the Jews and with the disciples
- 1st dialogue: 6: 22-27 with the people: the people seek Jesus and find him in Capernaum 2nd dialogue: 6: 28-34 with the people: faith as the work of God and the manna of the desert 3rd dialogue: 6: 35-40 with the people: the true bread is to do God's will.
- 4th dialogue: 6: 41-51 with the Jews: the complaining of the Jews 5th dialogue: 6: 52-58 with the Jews: Jesus and the Jews.
- 6th dialogue: 6: 59-66 with the disciples: reaction of the disciples
- 7th dialogue: 6: 67-71 with the disciples: confession of Peter
- The conversation of Jesus with the people, with the Jews and with the disciples is a beautiful dialogue, but a demanding one. Jesus tries to open the eyes of the people in a way that they will learn to read the events and discover in them the turning point that life should take. Because it is not enough to follow behind miraculous signs which multiply the bread for the body. Man does not live by bread alone. The struggle for life without mysticism does not reach the roots. The people, while speaking with Jesus, always remain more annoyed or upset by his words. But Jesus does not give in, neither does he change the exigencies. The discourse seems to be a funnel. In the measure in which the conversation advances, less people remain with Jesus. At the end only the twelve remain there, but Jesus cannot trust them either! Today the same thing happens. When the Gospel begins to demand commitment, many people withdraw, go away.
- John 6: 22-27: People look for Jesus because they want more bread. The people follow Jesus. They see that he did not go into the boat with the disciples and, because of this, they do not understand what he had done to reach Capernaum. They did not even understand the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves. People see what has happened, but they cannot understand all this as a sign of something more profound. They stop only on the surface; in being satisfied with the food. They look for bread and life, but only for the body. According to the people, Jesus does what

Moses had done in the past: to feed all the people in the desert. According to Jesus, they wanted the past to be repeated. But Jesus asks the people to take a step more and advance. Besides working for the bread that perishes, they should work for the imperishable food. This new food will be given by the Son of Man, indicated by God himself. He brings life which lasts forever. He opens for us a new horizon on the sense of life and on God.

- John 6: 28-29: Which is God's work? The people ask: what should we do to carry out this work of God? Jesus answers that the great work of God asks us to —believe in the one sent by God. That is, to believe in Jesus!

Personal Questions

- The people were hungry, they eat the bread and they look for more bread. They seek the miracle and do not seek the sign of God who was hidden in that. What do I seek more in my life: the miracle or the sign?
- Keep silence within you for a moment and ask yourself: To believe in Jesus: What does this mean for me concretely in my daily life?

Concluding Prayer

Lord, I tell you my ways and you answer me; teach me your wishes. Show me the way of your precepts, that I may reflect on your wonders. (Ps 119: 26-27)

Tuesday, April 16, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, generous Father, you have given us your Son Jesus that we may relive with him and like him, his passion and his resurrection. Through Jesus, give us the courage to place ourselves into your hands in the trials of life and in death, that one day we may see your glory and at your right hand your Son Jesus Christ, who lives with you forever.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 30-35

So they said, "What sign will you yourself do, the sight of which will make us believe in you? What work will you do? Our fathers ate manna in the desert; as scripture says: He gave them bread from heaven to eat."

Jesus answered them: "In all truth I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, it is my Father who gives you the bread from heaven, the true bread; for the bread of God is the bread which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "give us that bread always." Jesus answered them: I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst.

Reflection

The Discourse of the Bread of Life is not a text to be discussed and dissected, but rather it should be meditated and pondered. This is why, even if it is not fully understood, we should not be concerned. This text of the Bread of Life demands a whole life to meditate on it and deepen it. Such a text, people have to read it, meditate it, pray it, think about it, read it again, repeat it and ponder it, as one does with a good sweet in the mouth. We turn it and turn it in the mouth until it is finished. The one, who reads the Fourth Gospel superficially, may have the impression that John always repeats the same thing. Reading it more attentively, one becomes aware that it is not a question of repetition. The author of the fourth Gospel has his own way of repeating the same theme, but always at a higher and more profound level. It seems to be like a winding staircase. By turning one reaches the same place, but always at a higher level or a more profound one.

- John 6, 30-33: What sign will you yourself do, the sign which will make us believe in you? People had asked: What should we do to carry out the work of God? Jesus responds: "The work of God is to believe in the one who has sent," that is to believe in Jesus. This is why people formulate the new question: Which sign do you do so that we can see and can believe? Which work do you do? This means that they did not understand the multiplication of the loaves as a sign from God to legitimize Jesus before the people, as the one sent by God! They continue to argue: In the past our fathers ate the manna which Moses gave them! They called it –bread from Heaven! (Wis 16: 20), that is, –bread of God! Moses continues to be the great leader in whom to believe. If Jesus wants the people to believe in him, he should work a greater sign than Moses. –What work do you do?
- Jesus responds that the bread given by Moses was not the true bread from heaven. Coming from on high, yes, but it was not the bread of God, because it did not guarantee life to anyone. All of them died in the desert (Jn 6: 49). The true bread of heaven, the bread of God, is the one which conquers death and gives life! It is the one which descends from Heaven and gives life to the world. It is Jesus himself! Jesus tries to help the people to liberate themselves from the way of thinking of the past. For him, fidelity to the past does not mean to close up oneself in the ancient things and not accept renewal. Fidelity to the past means to accept the novelty which comes as the fruit of the seed which was planted in the past.
- John 6: 34-35: Lord, gives us always of that bread! Jesus answers clearly: "I am the bread of life!" To eat the bread of heaven is the same as to believe in Jesus and accept to follow the road that he teaches us, that is: "My food is to do the will of the one who has sent me and to complete his work!" (Jn 4: 34). This is the true food which nourishes the person, which transforms life and gives new life. This last verse of today's Gospel (Jn 6: 35) will be taken back as the first verse of tomorrow's Gospel (Jn 6: 35-40)

Personal Questions

- Hungry for bread, hungry for God. Which of these two predominates in me?
- Jesus says: "I am the bread of life." He takes away hunger and thirst. Which of these experiences do I have in my life?

Concluding Prayer

Lord turn your ear to me, make haste. Be for me a rock-fastness, a fortified citadel to save me. You are my rock, my rampart; true to your name, lead me and guide me! (Ps 31:1-2)

Wednesday, April 17, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

God, our Father,

you are our faithful God, even in days of trial for the Church and for each of us personally; you stay by our side, even if we are not aware of your presence.

Give us an unlimited trust in you and make us ever more aware that your Son Jesus is the meaning of our lives and that he nourishes us with himself, today and every day, forever.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 35-40

Jesus answered them: "I am the bread of life. No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst. But, as I have told you, you can see me and still you do not believe. Everyone whom the Father gives me will come to me; I will certainly not reject anyone who comes to me, because I have come from heaven, not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me. Now the will of him who sent me is that I should lose nothing of all that he has given to me, but that I should raise it up on the last day. It is my Father's will that whoever sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and that I should raise that person up on the last day."

Reflection

- John 6: 35-36: "I am the bread of life." The people enthusiastic with the perspective of having bread from heaven of which Jesus speaks and which gives life forever (Jn 6, 33), ask: "Lord, give us always that bread!" (Jn 6: 34). They thought that Jesus was speaking about some particular kind of bread. This is why, the people, interested in getting this bread, ask: "Give us always of this bread!" This petition of the people reminds us of the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. Jesus had said that she could have had within her a spring of living water, welling up to eternal life, and she in an interested way asks: "Lord, give me of that water!" (Jn 4: 15). The Samaritan woman is not aware that Jesus is not speaking about material water. Just as the people were not aware that Jesus was not speaking of material bread. Because of this, Jesus responds very clearly: "I am the bread of life! No one who comes to me will ever hunger; no one who believes in me will ever thirst." To eat the bread of heaven is the same as believing in Jesus. And to believe that he has come from heaven as a revelation of the Father. It is to accept the way which he has taught. But the people, in spite, of having seen Jesus, do not believe in him. Jesus is aware of the lack of faith and says: "You have seen me and you do not believe."
- John 6: 37-40: "To do the will of him who sent me." After the conversation with the Samaritan woman, Jesus had said to his disciples: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me!" (Jn 4: 34). Here, in the conversation with the people on the bread from

heaven, Jesus touches on the same theme: "I have come from heaven not to do my own will, but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me that I should lose nothing of all that he has given to me; but that I should raise it up on the last day." This is the food which people should look for: to do the will of the Heavenly Father. And this is the bread which nourishes the person in life and gives him/her life. Eternal life begins here, a life which is stronger than death! If we were really ready to do the will of the Father, we would have no difficulty to recognize the Father present in Jesus.

- John 6: 41-43: The Jews complained. Tomorrow's Gospel begins with verse 44 (John 6: 44-51) and skips verses 41 to 43. In verse 41, begins the conversation with the Jews, who criticize Jesus. Here we will give a brief explanation of the meaning of the word Jews in the Gospel of John in order to avoid that a superficial reading of it, may nourish in us Christians, the sentiment of anti-Semitism. First of all, it is well to remember that Jesus was a Jew and continues to be a Jew (Jn 4: 9). His disciples were Jews. The first Christian communities were all Jewish who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. It was only later, little by little, that in the communities of the Beloved Disciple, Greeks and Christians began to be accepted on the same level of the Jews. They were more open communities. But this openness was not accepted by all. Some Christians who came from the group of the Pharisees wanted to keep the separation between Jews and Pagans (Acts 15: 5). The situation was critical after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. The Pharisees became the dominating religious current in Judaism and began to define the religious directives or norms for the whole People of God: to suppress worship in the Greek language; to adopt solely the Biblical text in Hebrew; to define or determine the list of sacred books, and eliminate the books which existed only in the Greek translation of the Bible: Tobias, Judith, Esther, Baruch, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus and the two Books of the Maccabees: to segregate or separate the foreigners; not eat any food, suspected to be impure or which had been offered to the idols. All these norms assumed by the Pharisees had some repercussion on the communities of the Jews which accepted Jesus as Messiah. These communities had already journeyed very much. The openness for the Pagans was now irreversible. The Greek Bible had already been used for a long time. Thus, slowly, a reciprocal separation grew between Christianity and Judaism. In the years 85-90 the Jewish authorities began to discriminate those who continued to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah (Mt 5: 11-12; 24: 9-13). Those who continued to remain in the faith in Jesus were expelled from the Synagogue (Jn 9: 34). Many Christian communities feared this expulsion (Jn 9: 22) because it meant to lose the support of a strong and traditional institution such as the Synagogue. Those who were expelled lost the legal privileges that the Jews had conquered and gained throughout the centuries in the Empire. The expelled persons lost even the possibility of being buried decently. It was an enormous risk. This situation of conflict at the end of the first century had repercussion in the description of the conflict of Jesus with the Pharisees. When the Gospel of John speaks of the Jews he is not speaking of the Jewish people as such, but he is thinking much more of those few Pharisee authorities which were expelling the Christians from the Synagogues in the years 85-90, the time when the Gospel was written. We cannot allow this affirmation about the Jews to make anti-Semitism grow among Christians.

Personal Questions

- Anti-Semitism: look well within yourself and try to uproot any remain of anti-Semitism.

- To eat the bread of heaven means to believe in Jesus. How does all this help me to live the Eucharist better?

Concluding Prayer

Acclaim God, all the earth, sing psalms to the glory of his name, glorify him with your praises, say to God, "How awesome you are!" (Ps 66: 1-3)

Thursday, April 18, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Father, you draw all people to you who believe in your Son Jesus Christ. Faith, Lord, faith it is that we need.

Give it to us, we pray you, a living faith that we can encounter today Jesus Christ, your Son, in your word that you speak to us in the bread that you offer us, and in the food that we can give and can be to one another, in Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord, who lives with you and the Holy Spirit now and forever.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 44-51

"No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me, and I will raise that person up on the last day." It is written in the prophets: "They will all be taught by God; everyone who has listened to the Father, and learnt from him, comes to me. Not that anybody has seen the Father, except him who has his being from God: he has seen the Father. In all truth I tell you, everyone who believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate manna in the desert and they are dead; but this is the bread which comes down from heaven, so that a person may eat it and not die. I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world."

Reflection

Up until now the dialogue had been between Jesus and the people. From now on, the Jewish leaders begin to enter into conversation and the discussion becomes tenser.

- John 6: 44-46: Anyone who opens himself to God accepts Jesus and his proposal. The conversation becomes more demanding. Now, it is the Jews, the leaders of the people who complain: "Surely, this is Jesus, son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know." How can he say: "I have come down from heaven?" (Jn 6: 42). They thought they knew the things of God. But, in reality, they did not know them. If we were truly open and faithful to God, we would feel within us the impulse of God which attracts us toward Jesus and we would recognize that Jesus comes from God, because it is written in the Prophets: "They will all be taught by God; everyone who has listened to the Father and has learnt from him, comes to me."
- John 6: 47-50: "Your fathers ate manna in the desert and they are dead." In the celebration of the Passover, the Jews recalled the bread of the desert. Jesus helps them to take a step ahead. Anyone who celebrates the Passover, recalling only the

bread that the fathers ate in the past, will die as all of them did! The true sense of the Passover is not to recall the manna which falls from heaven, but to accept Jesus, the new Bread of Life and to follow the way which he has indicated. It is no longer a question of eating the meat of the paschal lamb, but rather of eating the flesh of Jesus, so that the one who eats it will not die, but will have eternal life!

- John 6: 51: “Anyone who eats of this bread will live forever.” And Jesus ends saying: “I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever and the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world.” Instead of the manna and the paschal lamb of the first exodus, we are invited to eat the new manna and the new paschal lamb that was sacrificed on the Cross for the life of all.
- The New Exodus. The multiplication of the loaves takes place close to the Passover (Jn 6: 4). The feast of the Passover was the prodigious souvenir of the Exodus, the liberation of the People from the clutches of Pharaoh. The whole episode which is narrated in chapter 6 of the Gospel of John has a parallel in the episodes related to the feast of the Passover, whether as liberation from Egypt or with the journey of the people in the desert in search of the Promised Land. The discourse of the Bread of Life, in the Synagogue of Capernaum, is related to chapter 16 of the Book of Exodus which speaks about the manna. It is worthwhile to read all of chapter 16 of Exodus. In perceiving the difficulties of the people in the desert we can understand better the teaching of Jesus here in chapter 6 of the Gospel of John. For example, when Jesus speaks of a food which does not perish, which endures for eternal life (Jn 6: 27) he is recalling the manna which produced worms and became rotten (Ex 16: 20). Like when the Jews complained (Jn 6: 41), they do the same thing as the Israelites in the desert, when they doubted of the presence of God in their midst during their journey across the desert (Ex 16: 2; 17: 3; Nb 11: 1). The lack of food made the people doubt about God and they began to complain against Moses and against God. Here also, the Jews doubt about God’s presence in Jesus of Nazareth and begin to complain (Jn 6: 41-42).

Personal Questions

- Does the Eucharist help me to live in a permanent state of Exodus? Am I succeeding?
- Anyone who is open to truth finds the response in Jesus. Today, many people withdraw and do not find any response. Whose fault is it? Is it of the persons who know how to listen? Or is it the fault of us, Christians, who do not know how to present the Gospel as a message of life?

Concluding Prayer

Come and listen, all who fear God, while I tell what he has done for me. To him I cried aloud, high praise was on my tongue. (Ps 66: 16-17)

Friday, April 19, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Our living and loving God, how could we know the depth of your love if your Son had not become flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood?

How could we ever have the courage to live for one another and if necessary to die if he had not given up his body and shed his blood for us?

Thank you for letting him stay in the eucharist with us and making himself our daily bread.

Let this bread be the food that empowers us to live and die as he did, for one another and for you, our living God, for ever and ever.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 52-59

Then the Jews started arguing among themselves, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'

Jesus replied to them: In all truth I tell you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise that person up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person. As the living Father sent me and I draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will also draw life from me. This is the bread which has come down from heaven; it is not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live forever.

This is what he taught at Capernaum in the synagogue.

Reflection

We are almost at the end of the Discourse of the Bread of Life. Here begins the part of the greatest polemic. The Jews close themselves and begin to discuss on the affirmations of Jesus.

- John 6: 52-55: Flesh and Blood: the expression of life and of the total gift. The Jews react:

How can this man give us his flesh to eat? The feast of the Passover was close at hand. After a few days everybody would have eaten the meat of the paschal lamb in the celebration of the night of the Passover. They did not understand the words of Jesus, because they took them literally. But Jesus does not diminish the exigencies, he does not withdraw or take away anything of what he has said and he insists: –In all truth I tell you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise that person up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person. (a) To eat the flesh of Jesus means to accept Jesus as the new Paschal Lamb, whose blood liberates us from slavery. The Law of the Old Testament, out of respect for life, prohibited to eat the blood (Dt 12: 16, 23; Acts 15: 29). The blood was the sign of life. (b) To drink the Blood of Jesus means to assimilate the same way of life which marked the life of Jesus. What gives life is not to celebrate the manna of the past, but rather to eat this new bread which is Jesus, his flesh and his blood. Participating in the Eucharistic Supper, we assimilate his life, his surrender, his gift of self. –If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and you do not drink his Blood you will not have life in you. They should accept Jesus as the Crucified Messiah, whose blood will be poured out.

- John 6: 56-58: Whoever eats my flesh, will live in me. The last phrases of the discourse of the Bread of Life are of the greatest depth and try to summarize everything which has been said. They recall the mystical dimension which surrounds the participation in the Eucharist. They express what Paul says in the letter to the Galatians: –It is no longer I, but Christ living in me (Ga 2: 20). And what the Apocalypse of John says: –If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share a meal at that person's side (Rev 3: 20). And John himself in the Gospel: –Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make a home in him (Jn 14: 23). And it ends with the promise of life which marks the difference with the ancient Exodus: –This is the bread which has come down from heaven. It is not like the bread our ancestors ate, they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live forever.
- John 6: 59: The discourse in the Synagogue ends. The conversation between Jesus and the people and the Jews in the Synagogue of Capernaum ends here. As it has been said before, the Discourse of the Bread of Life offers us an image of how the catechesis of that time was, at the end of the first century, in the Christian communities of Asia Minor. The questions of the people and of the Jews show the difficulties of the members of the communities. And the answer of Jesus represents the clarifications to help them to overcome the difficulties, to deepen their faith and to live more intensely the Eucharist which was celebrated above all in the night between Saturday and Sunday, the Day of the Lord.

Personal questions

- Beginning with the Discourse on the Bread of Life, the celebration of the Eucharist receives a very strong light and an enormous deepening. Which is the light that I see and which helps me to advance?
- To eat the flesh and blood of Jesus is the commandment that he leaves. How do I live the Eucharist in my life? Even if I cannot go to Mass every day or every Sunday, my life should be Eucharistic. How do I try to attain this objective?

Concluding Prayer

Praise Yahweh, all nations, extol him, all peoples, for his faithful love is strong and his constancy never-ending. (Ps 117: 1-2)

Saturday, April 20, 2024

Opening Prayer

Faithful God of the covenant,
in the daily choices we have to make
give us the courage to opt always
for Your Son and His ways
and to remain close to Him.

Bless the difficult road we have sometimes to take without seeing where it will lead us.

Keep us from making half-hearted decisions
when our faith is rather weak and make us accept all the consequences of our choice.
Keep us always faithful through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 60-69

Many of the disciples of Jesus who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, "Does this shock you? What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father." As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer walked with him. Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

3) Reflection

Today's Gospel presents the last part of the discourse of the Bread of Life. It is a question of the discussion of the disciples among themselves and with Jesus (Jn 6: 60-66) and of the conversation of Jesus with Simon Peter (Jn 6: 67-69). The objective is to show the exigencies of faith and the need for a serious commitment with Jesus and with His proposal. Up until this moment everything took place in the Synagogue of Capernaum. The place of this last part is not indicated.

- John 6: 60-63: Without the light of the Spirit these words cannot be understood. Many disciples thought that Jesus Himself was going too far! The celebration of the Passover was coming to an end and He was placing Himself in the most central part of the Passover. For this reason many people separated from the community and no longer went with Jesus. Jesus reacts and says: "It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer". It is here that He describes the impossibility of faith without divine action. It is only with the light of the Holy Spirit that it is possible to get the full sense of everything that Jesus says (Jn 14: 25-26; 16: 12-13). Paul, in the Letter to the Corinthians will say: "Written letters kill, but the Spirit gives life!" (2 Co 3: 6).

- John 6: 64-66: Some of you do not believe. In His discourse, Jesus had presented Himself as the food which satisfies hunger and thirst of all those who seek God. In the first Exodus, they have the test at Meriba. Before hunger and thirst in the desert, many doubted of the presence of God in their midst: "The Lord is in our midst, yes or no?" (Ex 17: 7) and they complained against Moses (cf. Ex 17: 2-3; 16: 7-8). They wanted to get away from him and return to Egypt. The disciples fall into this same temptation, they doubt of the presence of Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Confronted with the words of Jesus to "eat My flesh and drink My blood", many complained like the crowds in the desert (Jn 6: 60) and make the decision to break away from Jesus and with the community: "they went away and accompanied Him no more" (Jn 6: 66). The term "flesh and blood" is also a common Old Testament reference to life and the living.

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4) Personal Questions

- If I place myself in Peter's place before Jesus, what response do I give Jesus who asks me: "Do you want to go away also?"
- Today many persons no longer follow Jesus. Whose fault is it?
- Falling away can be like the crowd here. Little by little until there is nothing left. How do we see when we are falling away little by little and what can be done to prevent or reverse it?
- Which situation is worse: One who followed and then fell away, or one who never followed in the first place?

5) Concluding Prayer

Lord, I am Your servant, I am Your servant
and my mother was Your servant;
You have undone my fetters.
I shall offer You a sacrifice of thanksgiving
and call on the name of Yahweh. (Ps 116: 16-17)

Sunday, April 21, 2024

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us to read the Scriptures with the same mind that you read them to the disciples on the way to Emmaus. In the light of the Word, written in the Bible, you helped them to discover the presence of God in the disturbing events of your sentence and death. Thus, the cross that seemed to be the end of all hope became for them the source of life and of resurrection.

Create in us silence so that we may listen to your voice in Creation and in the Scriptures, in events and in people, above all in the poor and suffering. May your word guide us so that we too, like the two disciples from Emmaus, may experience the force of your resurrection and witness to others that you are alive in our midst as source of fraternity, justice and peace. We ask this of you, Jesus, son of Mary, who revealed to us the Father and sent us your Spirit. Amen.

Gospel Reading – John 10: 11-18

a) A Key to the Reading:

The Gospel of the fourth Sunday after Easter presents to us the parable of the Good Shepherd. This is why, sometimes, it is called the Sunday of the Good Shepherd. In some parishes the feast of the Parish priest is celebrated on this day, the shepherd of the flock. In today's Gospel, Jesus presented himself as the Good Shepherd, who has come –so that they may have life and have it to the full (Jn 10: 10). At that time, the shepherd was the image of the leader. Jesus says that many presented themselves as shepherds but in fact they were thieves and brigands. The same thing happens today. There are persons who present themselves as leaders, but in reality, instead of rendering service, they only seek their own interests. Some of them have such a meek way of speaking and make such an intelligent type of propaganda that they succeed in deceiving people. Have you ever had the experience of being deceived? Which are the criteria to evaluate a leadership whether at community level or at the level of the

country? How is and how should a good shepherd be? Keeping these questions in mind, let us try to meditate on the text of today's Gospel. During the reading let us try to be attentive to the images which Jesus uses to present himself to the people as a true and good Shepherd.

b) Division of the Text to Help in Reading It:

- Jn 10, 11: Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep
- Jn 10, 12-13: Jesus defines the attitude of the mercenary
- Jn 10, 14-15: Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep
- Jn 10: 16: Jesus defines the goal to be attained: only one flock and one shepherd
- Jn 10: 17-18: Jesus and the Father.

c) Text:

¹¹ I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. ¹² The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and the sheep do not belong to him, abandons the sheep as soon as he sees a wolf coming, and runs away, and then the wolf attacks and scatters the sheep; ¹³ he runs away because he is only a hired man and has no concern for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for my sheep. ¹⁶ And there are other sheep I have that are not of this fold, and I must lead these too. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be only one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will, and as I have power to lay it down, so I have power to take it up again; and this is the command I have received from my Father.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may penetrate and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What has struck you most in the text of the Good Shepherd? Why?
- Which are the images which Jesus applies to himself, how does he apply them and what do they signify?
- How many times does Jesus use the term **life** in this text and what does he affirm about life?
- What does the text say about the sheep that we are? Which are the qualities and the tasks of the sheep?
- Shepherd (Pastor) - Pastoral. Do our pastoral works continue the mission of Jesus-Shepherd?

For those who desire to deepen more into the text

a) Context:

- The discourse of Jesus on the Good Shepherd (Jn 10, 1-18) is like a brick inserted into a wall which already exists. With this brick the wall is stronger and more beautiful. Immediately before, in Jn 9, 40-41, the Gospel spoke about the healing of the man born blind (Jn 9, 1-38) and of the discussion of Jesus with the Pharisees on blindness (Jn 9, 39-41). Immediately after in Jn 10, 19-21, John gives the conclusion of Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees on blindness. The Pharisees presented themselves before the people as *leaders* and believed that they could discern and teach the things of God. In reality, they were blind (Jn 9, 40-41) and they despised the opinion of the people represented by the man born blind who had been cured by Jesus (Jn 9, 34). The discourse on the Good Shepherd has been inserted here for the purpose of offering some criteria to know how to discern who is the *leader*, the shepherd who deserves to be trusted. The parable fulfils a word which Jesus had just said to the Pharisees:
- –It is for judgment that I have come into this world, so that those without sight may see and those with sight may become blind. (Jn 9, 39).
- The discourse of Jesus on the –Good Shepherd presents three comparisons, linked among themselves by the image of the sheep, which offer criteria to discern who is the true shepherd:
- **First comparison** (Jn 10, 1-5): –*Enter through the gate*”. Jesus distinguishes between the shepherd of the sheep and the one who climbs some other way to rob them. That which reveals who is the shepherd is the fact that he enters through the gate. The thief climbs some other way.
- **Second comparison:** (Jn 10, 6-10): “*I am the gate*”. To enter through the gate means to act like Jesus, whose greatest concern is the life in abundance of the sheep. What the shepherd reveals is the defense of the life of the sheep.
- **Third comparison:** (Jn 10, 11-18): “*I am the Good Shepherd*”. Jesus is not simply a shepherd. He is the **Good** Shepherd. That which reveals who is the Good Shepherd is (1) the reciprocal knowledge between the sheep and the shepherd and (2) to give his life for the sheep.
- In what way can the parable of the Good Shepherd take away the blindness and open the eyes of persons? At that time, the image of the shepherd was the symbol of the *leader*. But not because of the simple fact that someone who took care of the sheep can be defined as shepherd. The mercenaries also count and the Pharisees were also *leaders*. But were they also shepherds? As we shall see, according to the parable, in order to discern who is shepherd and who is a mercenary, it is necessary to pay attention to two things: (a) To the attitude of the sheep before the shepherd guiding them, to see if they recognize his voice. (b) To the attitude of the shepherd before the sheep to see if his interest is the life of the sheep and if he is capable to give his life for them (Jn 10, 11-18).
- The text of the Gospel of the Fourth Sunday after Easter (Jn 10, 11-18) is the last part of the discourse on the Good Shepherd (Jn 10, 1-18). This is why we wish to comment on the whole text. We observe closely the diverse images which Jesus uses to present himself to us as the true and Good Shepherd.

b) Commentary on the text:

- **Jn 10: 1-5:** First image: the shepherd “enters through the gate”

Jesus begins the discourse with the comparison of the gate: He who does not enter through the gate, but climbs somewhere else, is a thief, a bandit! Instead, the one who enters through the gate, is the shepherd of the sheep! To understand this comparison, it is well to remember what follows. At that time, the shepherds

took care of the flocks during the day. When night arrived, they took the sheep into a large communitarian place, which was well protected against thieves and wolves. All the shepherds from the same region took their flocks there. There was a guardian who took care of them during the night. On the following day, early in the morning, the shepherd would go, knocked on the gate and the guardian would open. The sheep recognized the voice of their shepherd, got up and got out following him to the pastures. The sheep of the other shepherds heard the voice, but did not move because for them it was an unknown voice. The sheep recognizes the voice of its shepherd. From time to time, there was the danger of bandits. To rob the sheep, the thieves presented themselves to the guardian by the other door, but entered by another side or destroyed the wall, made of stones one on top of the other.

- **Jn 10, 6-10:** Second image: He explains what it means “to enter through the gate”: Jesus is the gate.

The Pharisees who were listening to Jesus, (cf. Jn 9: 40-41), did not understand the comparison. Then, Jesus explained: “I am the gate of the sheepfold. All those who have come before me, are thieves and bandits.” About whom is Jesus speaking using these hard words? Probably, he is referring to the religious leaders who drew people behind them, but who did not respond to the hopes of the people. They deceived the people, leaving them worse than before. They were not interested in the good of the people, but rather in their own interests and in their own portfolio. Jesus explains that the fundamental criterion to discern who is the shepherd and who is the bandit is the concern for the **life of the sheep**. He asks the people not to follow the one who presents himself as a shepherd, but does not desire the life of the people. It is here that Jesus pronounced that phrase which we sing even now: –I have come so that they may have life, and life to the full! This is the first criterion.

- **Jn 10, 11-16:** Third image: he explains what it means “I have come so that they have life, and life to the full” (The text for this fourth Sunday after Easter begins here).

- Jn 10: 11: Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep.

Jesus changes the comparison. First, he was the **gate** of the sheep. Now he says that he is the **shepherd** of the sheep. And not just any shepherd, but rather: “I am the **Good** Shepherd!” The image of the good shepherd comes from the Old Testament. Everybody knew what a shepherd was and how he lived and worked. In saying that he is a Good Shepherd, Jesus presents himself as the one who comes to fulfil the promises of the prophets and the hopes of the people. He insists on two points: (a) the defense of the life of the sheep; the **good** shepherd gives his life (Jn 10: 11, 15, 17, 18); (b) in the reciprocal understanding between the shepherd and the sheep; the shepherd knows his sheep and they know the shepherd (Jn 10: 4, 14, 16).

- Jn 10: 12-13: Jesus defines the attitude of the mercenary who is not a shepherd.

The mercenary who is not a shepherd. Looking from outside, the differences between the mercenary and the shepherd are not perceived. Both of them are busy with the sheep. Today there are many persons who take care of other persons in hospitals, in the communities, in the old peoples’ homes, in schools, in public services, in the parishes. Some do this out of love, others, **hardly** for a salary, in order to survive. These persons are not interested in the other persons. Their attitude is that of a functionary, of a worker earning a salary, of a mercenary. In a moment of danger, they are not interested, because –the sheep are not theirs, the children are not theirs, the pupils are not theirs, their neighbors are not theirs, the faithful are not theirs, the sick are not theirs, the

members of the community are not theirs.

Now, instead of judging the behavior of others, let us place ourselves before our own conscience and let us ask ourselves: In my relationship with others, am I a mercenary or a shepherd? Look, Jesus does not condemn you because the worker has a right to his salary (Lk 10: 7), but he asks you to take another step forward and to become a shepherd.

- Jn 10: 14-15: Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep.

Two things characterize the Good Shepherd: a) he knows the sheep and is known by them. in the language of Jesus, **"to know"** is not a question of knowing the name or the face of the person, but to be in relationship with a person as a friend, and with affection. b) to give the life for the sheep. That means to be ready to sacrifice oneself out of love. The sheep feel and perceive when a person defends and protects them. This is valid for all of us: for the parish priests, and for those who have some responsibility towards other people. In order to know if a parish priest is a good shepherd, it is not sufficient to be named parish priest and to obey the norms of Canon Law. It is necessary to be recognized as a good shepherd by the sheep.

Sometimes this is forgotten in the present-day politics of the Church. Jesus says that not only does the shepherd know the sheep, but also the sheep know the shepherd. They have criteria for this. Because if they do not recognize him, even if he is named according to Canon Law, he is not a shepherd according to the Heart of Jesus. Not only the sheep have to obey the one who guides them. Also, the one who guides has to be very attentive to the reaction of the sheep to know if he is acting like a shepherd or like a mercenary.

- Jn 10: 16: Jesus defines the goal to be attained; only one flock, only one shepherd.

Jesus opens the horizon and says that he has other sheep that are not of this fold. They have not as yet heard the voice of Jesus, but when they will hear it, they will become aware that he is the shepherd and they will follow him. Who will do this, and when will this happen? We are the ones, imitating in everything the behavior of Jesus, the Good Shepherd!

- Jn 10: 17-18: Jesus and the Father.

In these two last verses Jesus opens himself and makes us understand something which is in the deepest part of his heart: his relationship with the Father. Here the truth of everything he says in another moment is perceived: "I shall no longer call you servants, but I have called you friends because all that I have heard from the Father I have made it known to you" (Jn 15: 15). Jesus is for us an open book.

Extending the information:

The image of the Shepherd in the Old Testament which is realized in Jesus

- In Palestine, the survival of the people depended on the cattle breeding: goats and sheep. The image of the shepherd who guides his sheep to the pasture was known by everyone, just like today we know the image of the bus driver. It was normal to use the image of the shepherd to indicate the function of the one who governed and guided the people. The prophets criticized the kings because they were shepherds who were not concerned about their flocks and did not guide them to the pastures (Jer 2: 8; 10: 21; 23: 1-2). This criticism of the bad shepherds increased and reached its summit when the people were deported into exile because of the

fault of the king (Ezk 34: 1-10; Zac 11: 4-17).

- In the face of the frustration which they had to suffer because of the way the bad shepherds acted, the desire arose to have God as the shepherd. a desire which is very well expressed in the Psalm: "The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want" (Ps 23: 1-6; Gen 48: 15). The prophets hope that in the future, God himself will come to guide his fold, like a shepherd (Is 40: 11; Ezk 34: 11-16). And they hope that this time the people will know how to recognize the voice of their shepherd: –Today listen to his voice! (Ps 95: 7). They hope that God will come as a Judge who will pronounce judgment among the sheep of the fold (Ezk 34: 17). The desire and the hope arise that one day, God will arouse good shepherds and that the Messiah will be a Good Shepherd for the People of God (Jr 3: 15; 23: 4).
- Jesus fulfils this hope and presents himself as the Good Shepherd, different from the bandits who, before him, had robbed the people. He also presents himself as the Judge of the people who, at the end, will issue the sentence as the shepherd who separates the sheep from the goats (Mt 25: 31-46). In Jesus the prophecy of Zechariah is fulfilled, which says that the good shepherd will be persecuted by the evil shepherds, annoyed by his denunciation: –Strike the shepherd, scatter the sheep! (Zac 13: 7).
- At the end of the Gospel of John, the image is extended and Jesus at the end is everything at the same time: gate (Jn 10: 7, shepherd (Jn 10: 11) lamb and sheep (Jn 1: 36)!

A key for the Gospel of John:

Everyone perceives the difference that exists between the Gospel of John and the other three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Someone defines it as follows: The other three make a photo, John makes an X-Ray. That is, John helps his readers to discover the most profound dimension which exists in what Jesus says and does. He reveals the hidden things that only the X-Rays of faith succeed to discover and reveal. John teaches to read the other Gospels with the gaze of faith and to discover the most profound significance. Jesus himself had already said that he would have sent the gift of his Spirit in order that we could understand all the fullness of his own word (Jn 14: 24-25; 16: 12-13). The ancient Fathers of the Church said that the Gospel of John is spiritual and symbolical.

Some examples:

- Jesus cures the man born blind (Jn 9: 6-7). For John this miracle has a more profound significance. It reveals that Jesus is the light of the World who makes us understand and contemplate better the things of God in life (Jn 9: 39).
- Jesus rises Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11: 43-44) not only to help Lazarus and to console his two sisters, Martha and Mary, but also to reveal that he is the Resurrection and the Life (Jn 11: 25-26).
- Jesus changes 600 liters of water into wine at the wedding at Cana (Jn 2: 1-13). And he does this not only to safeguard the joy of the feast, but also and above all, to reveal that the new Law of the Gospel is like wine compared to the water of the former Law. And he does it with such great abundance (600 liters), precisely to signify that it will not be lacking for anyone, up until today!
- Jesus multiplies the bread and feeds the hungry (Jn 6: 11) not only to satisfy the hunger of those poor people who were with him in the desert, but also to reveal that he himself is the bread of life which nourishes all throughout life (Jn 6: 34-58).
- Jesus speaks with the Samaritan woman about water (Jn 4: 7.10), but he wanted that

she would succeed to discover the water of the gift of God which she already had within her (Jn 4: 14-14). In one word, it is the Spirit of Jesus that gives life (Jn 6: 63). The flesh or only the letter are not enough and can even kill the sense and the life (2 Cor 3: 6).

Prayer: Psalm 23 (22)

Yahweh is my shepherd!

Yahweh is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

In grassy meadows he lets me lie. By tranquil streams he leads me to restore my spirit.

He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name.

Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death I should fear no danger, for you are at my side. Your staff and your crook are there to soothe me.

You prepare a table for me under the eyes of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup brims over.

Kindness and faithful love pursue me every day of my life. I make my home in the house of Yahweh for all time to come.

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank for the word that has enabled us to understand better the will of the Father. May your Spirit enlighten our actions and grant us the strength to practice that which your Word has revealed to us. May we, like Mary, your mother, not only listen to but also practice the Word. You who live and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen.

Monday, April 22, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord God, our Father,

the Spirit of Jesus calls us, as he called your Son, to abandon our old selves and our old world to be free for new life and growth. Forgive us our fear and hesitations, lead us out of our worn-out phrases and habits, and our self-made certainties, steep us in the gospel of your Son, that his good news may become credible in our times and our world.

We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 10: 1-10

Jesus said: "In all truth I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold through the gate, but climbs in some other way, is a thief and a bandit. He who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the flock; the gatekeeper lets him in, the sheep hear his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. When he has brought out all those that are his, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his

voice. They will never follow a stranger but will run away from him because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.” Jesus told them this parable but they failed to understand what he was saying to them. So Jesus spoke to them again: “In all truth I tell you, I am the gate of the sheepfold. All who have come before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep took no notice of them. I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe: such a one will go in and out and will find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full.”

Reflection

- In Jesus we have the model of the true shepherd. In him is fulfilled the expectation of the Good Shepherd promised by God: the –Great Shepherd|| greater than Moses (Heb 13: 20).
- John 10: 1-6: The gate of the sheepfold. In Jn 10: 1-10 it is said that Jesus is the gate to get to the sheep and to be led to the pastures (10: 7, 9-10).
- The theme of the sheep had already been introduced in John 2: 15 and in a particular way in 5: 2 where it is indicated that there is a Sheep Pool with five porticos along which were laid the sick to be healed. In this last context the sheep indicate the people who were oppressed by their directors. In Jn 10: 1, Jesus links the theme of the sheep to the atrium or inner courtyard of the Temple, the Jewish institution administered by men of power who trampled on the rights, justice and exploited the people. Such individuals were called by Jesus “thieves and bandits.”
- Jesus begins his long presentation before the Pharisees, who were closed up in their unbelief and insufficiency (9: 40-41) with a general affirmation: a more sure way to enter into contact with the sheep is that of entering by the gate of the enclosure in which they are kept. Anyone who enters in a different way is not animated by a reason of love for the sheep, but in order to exploit them for his own interest. This is the sin of those who direct the people: to take hold of everything that belongs to all for themselves. Jesus calls this attitude using the term “thief.” This was precisely the accusation that Jesus addressed to the chief priests of the people during his first visit to the Temple (2: 13ff).
- Another term that Jesus uses to indicate those who take away from the people what belongs to them is “bandit.” Such a term indicates those who use violence. Therefore, the chief priests of the Temple oblige the people to submit themselves to the violence of their system (7: 13; 9: 22). The effect of this is that it produces a state of death (5: 3, 21, 25).
- The shepherd enters through the gate to take care of the sheep, not to oppress them or maltreat them. In fact, the sheep recognize his authority (voice) and follow him. The voice of Jesus contains a message of liberation for them that is typical of the Messiah. Besides, his voice is not addressed to an anonymous group of people but he calls each one personally. For Jesus no anonymous crowd of people exists, but each person has a face, a name, dignity. The Temple (the enclosure of the sheep) has become a place of darkness, characterized only by economic interests; money has replaced the exclusive attention to God: the Temple has become the business or trading house (Jn 2: 16).
- Jesus leads the people to take them out of the darkness. And he does not do this in a fictitious way, but in a real way, because such is the work which the Father has entrusted to him. The fundamental strokes of this mission are to enter and to call. Those who respond to that call, to the call to liberty become a new community:

those who are His own.

- John 10: 7-10: Jesus is the new door. Jesus again uses the symbolism of the gate in vv. 7-8: applying this to himself. He is the new door not only in regard to the old enclosure of Israel represented by the chief priests of the people but also in regard to those who follow him. He reminds the first ones of his legitimacy to be the only place of access for the sheep, because he is the Messiah ready to give his life for the sheep. And it is not by domination or prevarication, that one can approach the sheep to have a relationship with them, but rather by assuming the attitude of the one who gives his life for them. His words are a categorical invitation to change mentality, way of thinking and way of relating.

The entrance through Jesus signifies to consider the good of man as a priority and to commit all our energy to attain this. Anyone who does not enter into this new logic is an oppressor. The reader finds that the words of Jesus addressed to his contemporaries and in a particular way to the chief priests of the people, who have used domination and violence to exploit the people, are truly hard and strong, firm.

He is the new gate in regard to every person. But for men and women of today what does it mean to enter through the door which is Jesus? It implies to get close to Him, to trust Him (Jn 6: 35), to follow Him and to allow ourselves to be guided by His message (8: 31, 51), in definitive it means to participate in the dedication of Jesus so that the true happiness of man may be accomplished.

Personal Questions

- Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he always knows you, but do you recognize him? He is a Shepherd who comes to your life as a door to go out and to enter: do you allow Him to lead you when you relate with others?
- In your community, in your family are you also a door, not to close it, but to remain open to fraternal communication, to allow esteem and hope to go through?

Concluding Prayer

Lord, send out your light and your truth; they shall be my guide, to lead me to your holy mountain to the place where you dwell. (Ps 43: 3)

Tuesday, April 23, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord God, our Father,

the Spirit of Jesus calls us, as he called your Son, to abandon our old selves and our old world to be free for new life and growth. Forgive us our fear and hesitations, lead us out of our worn-out phrases and habits, and our self-made certainties, steep us in the gospel of your Son, that his good news may become credible in our times and our world.

We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 10: 22-30

It was the time of the feast of Dedication in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the Temple walking up and down in the Portico of Solomon. The Jews gathered round him and said, "How much longer are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us openly."

Jesus replied: "I have told you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name are my witness; but you do not believe, because you are no sheep of mine. The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life; they will never be lost and no one will ever steal them from my hand. The Father, for what he has given me, is greater than anyone, and no one can steal anything from the Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

Reflection

- Chapters one to twelve of the Gospel of John are called –The Book of Signs. In these chapters we have the progressive revelation of the Mystery of God in Jesus. In the measure in which Jesus makes this revelation, adherence and opposition grow around him according to the vision or idea which each one has of the coming of the Messiah. This way of describing the activity of Jesus does not only serve to inform how adherence to Jesus took place at that time, but also and above all, how this should take place in us today, his readers. At that time, all expected the coming of the Messiah and they had their criteria of how to recognize him. They wanted him to be like they imagined that he should be. But Jesus does not submit himself to that requirement. He reveals the Father as the Father is and not as his listeners would want him to be. He asks for conversion in the way of thinking and of acting. Today, also, each one of us has his/her own likes and own preferences. Sometimes we read the Gospel to see if we find in it a confirmation of our desires. Today's Gospel presents some light concerning this.
- John 10: 22-24: The Jews question Jesus. It was cold; it was the month of October. It was the Feast of the dedication which celebrated the purification of the temple done by Judah Maccabee (2 Mac 4: 36, 59). It was a very popular Feast with much light. Jesus was out on the square of the Temple, in the Portico of Solomon. The Jews said: "How much longer are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us openly." They wanted Jesus to define himself and that they could verify, according to their own criteria, if Jesus was or was not the Messiah. They wanted some proofs. It is the attitude of the one who feels that he dominates the situation. The new ones must present their credentials. Otherwise, they have no right to speak or to act.
- John 10: 25-26: Response of Jesus: the works that I do are my witness. The response of Jesus is always the same: "I have told you, but you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name are my witness; but you do not believe, because you are no sheep of mine." It is not a question of giving proofs. It would be useless. When a person does not want to accept the witness of someone, there is no proof which is valid and which will lead the person to change and think differently. The basic problem is the disinterested openness of the person toward God and toward truth. Where this openness exists, Jesus is recognized by his sheep.
- The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice. Jesus will say these words before Pilate (Jn 18: 37). The Pharisees lacked this openness.
- John 10: 27-28: "My sheep listen to my voice." Jesus repeats the parable of the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep and they know him. This mutual understanding –

between Jesus who comes in the name of the Father and the persons who open themselves to truth – is the source of eternal life. This union between the Creator and the creature through Jesus exceeds every threat of death: They will never be lost and no one will ever steal them from my hand! They are safe and secure and, because of this, they are in peace and enjoy full freedom.

- John 10: 29-30: The Father and I are one. These two verses refer to the mystery of the union between Jesus and the Father: “The Father, for what he has given me, is greater than anyone, and no one can steal anything from my Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.” These and other phrases make us guess or have a glimpse at something of the greatest mystery: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14: 9). “The Father is in me and I am in the Father (Jn 10: 38). This union between Jesus and the Father is not something automatic, but rather it is the fruit of obedience: “I always do what pleases my Father” (Jn 8: 29; 16: 38; 17: 4). “My food is to do the will of the Father” (Jn 4: 34; 5: 30). The Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus learnt obedience from the things that he suffered (Heb 5: 8). “He was obedient until death and death on the Cross” (Ph 2: 8). The obedience of Jesus is not a disciplinary one, but rather it was prophetic. He obeys in order to be total transparency and, thus, to be the revelation of the Father. Because of this, he could say: “The Father and I are one!” It was a long process of obedience and of incarnation which lasted 33 years. It began with Mary’s YES (Lk 1: 38) and ended with: “It is all fulfilled!” (Jn 19: 30).

Personal Questions

- Is my obedience to God, disciplinary or prophetic? Do I reveal something of God or am I only concerned about my own salvation?
- Jesus does not submit himself to the exigencies of those who want to verify if he is the Messiah. In me, is there something of this attitude of dominion and of inquiry of the enemies of Jesus?

Concluding Prayer

May God show kindness and bless us, and make his face shine on us.

Then the earth will acknowledge your ways, and all nations your power to save. (Ps 67: 2-3)

Wednesday, April 24, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

through your Son Jesus Christ you assure us that he came not to condemn us but to bring us life, a life worth living, a life that is rich and refreshing us and our world with love and a spirit of service.

Let Jesus stay with us as the light in which we see all that is good and worth living for and let us share in his life that has no end. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 12: 44-50

Jesus declared publicly: "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in the one who sent me, whoever sees me, sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as light, to prevent anyone who believes in me from staying in the dark anymore.

If anyone hears my words and does not keep them faithfully, it is not I who shall judge such a person, since I have come not to judge the world, but to save the world: anyone who rejects me and refuses my words has his judge already: the word itself that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day.

For I have not spoken of my own accord; but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and what to speak, and I know that his commands mean eternal life. And therefore, what the Father has told me is what I speak."

Reflection

Today's Gospel presents to us the last part of the Book of Signs (from 1 to 12), in which the Evangelist draws up a balance. Many believed in Jesus and had the courage to manifest their faith publicly. They were afraid to be expelled from the Synagogue. And many did not believe: Though they had been present when he gave so many signs, they did not believe in him; this was to fulfil the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Lord, who has given credence to what they have heard from us? And who has seen in it a revelation of the Lord's arm?" (Jn 12: 37-38). After this confirmation, John takes back some of the central themes of his Gospel:

- John 12: 44-45: To believe in Jesus is to believe in him who sent him. This phrase is a summary of the Gospel of John. It is the theme that appears and reappears in many ways. Jesus is so united to the Father that he does not speak in his own name, but always in the name of the Father. He who sees Jesus, sees the Father. If you want to know God, look at Jesus. God is Jesus!
- John 12: 46: Jesus is the light who comes into the world. Here John comes back to what he had already said in the Prologue: "The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone" (Jn 1: 9). "The light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it" (Jn 1: 5). Here he repeats: "I have come into the world as light, to prevent anyone who believes in me from staying in the dark anymore." Jesus is a living response to the great questions which move and inspire the search of the human being. It is a light which enlightens the horizon. It makes one discover the luminous side of the darkness of faith.
- John 12: 47-48: "I have not come to condemn the world." Getting to the end of a stage, a question arises: How will judgment be? In these two verses the Evangelist clarifies the theme of judgment. The judgment is not done according to threats, with maledictions. Jesus says: "If anyone hears my words and does not keep them faithfully, it is not I who shall judge such a person, since I have come not to judge the world, but to save the world. Anyone who rejects me and refuses my words has his judge already: the word itself that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day." The judgment consists in the way in which the person defines himself before his own conscience.
- John 12: 49-50: "The Father commanded me what to say." The last words of the Book of Signs are a summary of everything that Jesus says and does up until now. He reaffirms that which he affirmed from the beginning: "For I have not spoken of my

own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and what to speak, and I know that his commands mean eternal life. And, therefore, what the Father has told me is what I speak." Jesus is the faithful reflection of the Father. For this reason, he does not offer proofs or arguments to those who provoke him to legitimize his credentials. It is the Father who legitimizes him through the works that he does. And using the word works, he does not refer to great miracles, but to all that he says and does, even the minutest thing. Jesus himself is the Sign of the Father. He is the walking miracle, the total transparency. He does not belong to himself but is entirely the property of the Father. The credentials of an ambassador do not come from him, but from the one he represents. They come from the Father.

Personal Questions

- John draws up a balance of the revealing activity of God. If I made a balance of my life, what positive thing would there be in me?
- Is there something in me which condemns me?

Concluding Prayer

Let the nations rejoice and sing for joy, for you judge the world with justice, you judge the peoples with fairness, you guide the nations on earth.

Let the nations praise you, God, let all the nations praise you. (Ps 67: 4-5)

Thursday, April 25, 2024

Feast – St Mark, Evangelist

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, there is much in us that obscures Your word and keeps us from being truly Your Church. We pray You today: Call us, as once You called Mark, to speak and live Your word. Inspire us through Your Spirit and teach us to live in the hope that Your kingdom will come and remain among us through Jesus Christ, our Lord, now and for ever.

Gospel Reading - Mark 16: 15-20

Jesus appeared to the Eleven and said to them: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." Then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

Reflection

Today's Gospel forms part of the appendix of the Gospel of Mark (Mk 16: 9-20) which presents a list of some apparitions of Jesus: to Magdalene (Mk 16: 9-11), to the two disciples who were walking out in the country (Mk 16: 12-13) and to the twelve apostles (Mk 16: 14-18). This last apparition, together with the description of the Ascension into Heaven (Mk 16: 19-20), forms the Gospel for today.

- Mark 16: 14: The signs which accompany the announcement of the Good News. Jesus appears to the eleven disciples and reproaches them for not believing the persons who had seen Him resurrected. They did not believe Mary Magdalene (Mk 16:11), nor the two disciples on the road out in the country (Mk 16:13). Several times, Mark refers to the resistance of the disciples to believing the witness of those who experienced the resurrection of Jesus. Why does Mark insist so much on the lack of faith of the disciples? Probably to teach two things: First, that faith in Jesus goes through faith in persons who give witness. Second, that no one should be discouraged when there is doubt in the heart. Even the eleven disciples doubted!
- Mark 16: 15-18: The mission to announce the Good News to the whole world. After having criticized the lack of faith of the disciples, Jesus confers their mission to them: "Go out to the whole world, proclaim the Gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned." To those who had the courage to believe in the Good News and who are baptized, Jesus promises the following signs: they will cast out devils, they will speak new languages, they will pick up snakes in their hands and be unharmed if they drink deadly poison, and they will lay their hands on the sick who will recover. This happens even today. To cast out devils is to fight against the force of evil which destroys life. The life of many people improves because they entered into the community and have begun to live the Good News of the presence of God in their life.'
 - to speak new languages: it means to begin to communicate with others in a new way. Sometimes we meet a person whom we have never seen before, and we care deeply for them and their situation, even though we don't know them well. This happens because we speak the same language, the language of love.
 - deadly poison will not harm them: there are many things that poison life together in community. There is gossip which destroys the relationship between persons. The one who lives in the presence of God does not participate in these things and is able to not be disturbed by this terrible poison.
 - they cure the sick. Wherever there is a clear and lively knowledge of God's presence, there is also a special care given to the excluded and marginalized, especially the sick. What can help cure is that the person feels accepted and loved.
- Mark 16: 19-20: Through the community, Jesus continues His mission. Jesus Himself, who lives in Palestine and accepts the poor of His time, revealing the love of the Father to them, continues to be alive in our midst in our community. Through us, He wants to continue His mission to reveal the Good News of God's love to the poor. Even up to this time the resurrection takes place, and it impels us to sing: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ, who will separate us?" No power of this world is capable of neutralizing the force that comes from faith in the Resurrection (Rm 8: 35-39). A community which wants to be a witness of the Resurrection should be a sign of life and should struggle against the forces of death in such a way that the world may be a favorable place for life. Above all, in parts of the world such as Latin America and the Middle East, where the life of people is in danger because of the system of death which has become common there, the communities should be a living proof of the hope which overcomes the world without fear of being happy!

Personal Questions

- How do these signs of God's presence take place in my life?
- What are the signs of the presence of Jesus in our midst that convince people the most today?
- Do I proclaim the Gospel through my words and actions every day, or just sometimes?

Concluding Prayer

I shall sing the faithful love of Yahweh forever,
from age to age my lips shall declare Your constancy,
for You have said: love is built to last forever,
You have fixed Your constancy firm in the heavens. (Ps 89: 1-2)

Friday, April 26, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,
your Son Jesus Christ is to us
the way that leads to You and to one another,
the truth that is good news of love and hope,
the life which He sacrificed to give it.
Help us to show the way to Him
and to go His way to one another,
to speak the truth that is encouraging and credible,
to give life by sharing happiness,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 14:1-6

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."

Reflection

- These five chapters (Jn 13-17) are a beautiful example of how the communities of the Beloved Disciple at the end of the first century in Asia Minor, which today is Turkey, carried on the catechesis. For example, in chapter 14, the questions of the three

disciples, Thomas (Jn 14:5), Philip (Jn 14:8) and Judas Thaddeus (Jn 14:22) were also the questions and problems within the communities. The answers of Jesus to the three of them are like a mirror in which the communities found a response to their doubts and difficulties. To better understand the environment in which the catechesis was carried out, it is possible to do the following. During and after the reading of the text, it is good to close the eyes and pretend that we are in the room in the midst of the disciples, participating in the encounter with Jesus. While we listen, it is necessary to pay attention to the way which Jesus prepares His friends to separate themselves and reveals to them His friendship, communicating to them security and support.

- John 14: 1-2: Do not let your hearts be troubled. The text begins with an exhortation: "Do not let your hearts be troubled!" And immediately He adds: "In my Father's house there are many places to live in!" The insistence on continuing to use encouraging words to overcome troubles and differences is a sign that there were many disagreements among the communities. One would say to the other: "Our way of living the faith is better than yours. We are saved! You live in error: If you want to go to heaven, you have to convert yourselves and live like we do!" Jesus says: "In My Father's house there are many places!" It is not necessary that everybody thinks the same way. The important thing is that all accept Jesus, the revelation of the Father, and that out of love for Him, they have attitudes of understanding, service and love. Love and service are the basis which unite the bricks and help the diverse communities to become a Church of brothers and sisters.
- John 14: 3-4: The farewell of Jesus. Jesus says that He is going to prepare a place and that afterwards He will return to take us with Him to the Father's house. He wants us to be with Him forever. The return which Jesus speaks about is the coming of the Spirit that He sends and who acts in us, in such a way that we can live as He lived (Jn 14: 16-17, 26; 16: 13-14). John's community feared a delay in His future return and his Gospel is filled with reminders of the Spirit. Jesus ends by saying: "You know the way to the place where I am going!" Anyone who knows Jesus knows the way, because the way is the life that He lived and which led Him through death together to the Father.
- John 14: 5-6: Thomas asks which is the way. Thomas says: "Lord, we do not know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus answers: "I am the Way, I am Truth and Life! No one can come to the Father except through Me". Three important words. Without the way we cannot go. Without the truth one cannot make a good choice. Without life, there is only death! Jesus explains the sense. He is the Way, because "No one can come to the Father except through Me". And He is the gate through which the sheep enter and go out (Jn 10: 9). Jesus is the truth, because looking at Him, we see the image of the Father. "Anyone who knows Me knows the Father!" Jesus is the life, because walking like Jesus, we will be united to the Father and we will have life in us!

Personal Questions

- In the context and with knowledge of the last few days' Gospels, how do we go to the Father through Jesus? What is involved?
- Jesus says: "In My Father's house there are many places". How would you interpret this today? How would you interpret this relative to ecumenism? Or within Church doctrine?

Concluding Prayer

Sing a new song to Yahweh, for He has performed wonders, His saving power is in His right hand and His holy arm. (Ps 98: 1)

Saturday, April 27, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

you are distant and unknown, and yet so near that you know and love and save us through your Son Jesus Christ.

May he be present in us and in our actions that we may do the same works of justice, truth and loving service and thus become the sign to the world that your Son is alive and that you are a saving God now and forever.

Gospel Reading - John 14: 7-14

Jesus said to his disciples: "If you know me, you will know my Father too. From this moment you know him and have seen him.

Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and then we shall be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father, so how can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? What I say to you I do not speak of my own accord: it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his works. You must believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe it on the evidence of these works.

In all truth I tell you, whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself, and will perform even greater works, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

Reflection

- John 14: 7: To know Jesus is to know the Father. The text of today's Gospel is the continuation of that of yesterday. Thomas had asked: "Lord we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?" Jesus answers: "I am the Way, I am Truth and Life! No one can come to the Father except through me." And he adds: "If you know me, you will know the Father too. From this moment you know him and have seen him". This is the first phrase of today's Gospel. Jesus always speaks of the Father, because it was the life of the Father which appeared in all that he said and did. This constant reference to the Father provokes Philip's question.
- John 14: 8-11: Philip asks: "Lord, show us the Father and then we will be satisfied!" This was the desire of the disciples, the desire of many persons of the communities of the Beloved Disciple and it is the desire of many people today: What do people do to see the Father of whom Jesus speaks so much? The response of Jesus is very beautiful

and is valid even now: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me! Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father!" People should not think that God is far away from us, distant and unknown. Anyone who wants to know how and who God the Father is, it suffices that he looks at Jesus. He has revealed him in his words and gestures of his life! "I am in the Father and the Father is in me!" Through his obedience, Jesus identified himself totally with the Father. At every moment he did what the Father asked him to do (Jn 5: 30; 8: 28-29, 38). This is why, in Jesus everything is revelation of the Father! And the signs and the works are the works of the Father! As people say: "The son is the face of the father!" This is why in Jesus and for Jesus, God is in our midst.

- John 14: 12-14: The Promise of Jesus. Jesus makes a promise to say that his intimacy with the Father is not his privilege only, but that it is possible for all those who believe in him. We also, through Jesus, can succeed in doing beautiful things for others as Jesus did for the people of his time. He intercedes for us. Everything that people ask him for; he asks the Father and always obtains it. as long as it is to render service. Jesus is our advocate, he defends us. He leaves but he does not leave us defenseless. He promises that he will ask the Father and the Father will send another advocate or consoler, the Holy Spirit. Jesus even says that it is necessary for him to leave, because otherwise the Holy Spirit will not be able to come (Jn 16: 7). And the Holy Spirit will fulfil the things of Jesus in us, if we act in the name of Jesus and we observe the great commandment of the practice of love.

Personal Questions

- To know Jesus is to know the Father. In the Bible the word "to know a person" is not only an intellectual understanding, but it also presupposes a profound experience of the presence of the person in one's life. Do I know Jesus?
- Do I know the Father?

Concluding Prayer

The whole wide world has seen the saving power of our God.

Acclaim Yahweh, all the earth, burst into shouts of joy! (Ps 98: 3-4)

Sunday, April 28, 2024

5th Sunday of Easter

Opening Prayer

Lord, You are! And this is sufficient for us, to live by, to go on hoping every day, to walk in this world, not to choose the wrong road of being closed and lonely. Yes, You are forever and from all time; you are constant, O Jesus! Your being is our constant gift; it is an ever-ripe fruit that feeds and strengthens us in You, in Your presence. Lord, open our heart, open our being to your being; open us to life with the mysterious power of your Word. Help us to listen, to eat and savor this food for our souls, which is indispensable for us! Send us the good fruit of your Spirit so that He may bring about in us that which we read and meditate about you.

Gospel Reading – John 15: 1-8

- **To place the passage in its context:**

These few verses are part of the great discourse of Jesus to his disciples during that intimate moment of the last supper and they begin with verse 31, chapter 13, and proceeding up to the end of chapter 17. This passage has a very tight, deep and inseparable unity, unequalled in the Gospels and sums up the whole of Jesus' revelation in his divine life and in the mystery of the Trinity. It is the text that says that which no other text in the Scriptures is capable of saying concerning Christian life, its power, its tasks, its joys and pains, its hopes and its struggle in this world in the Church. Just a few verses, but full of love, that love to the very end that Jesus chose to live for his disciples, for us, even to this day and forever. In the strength of this love, the supreme and definitive gesture of infinite tenderness, which includes all other gestures of love, the Lord bequeaths to his disciples a new presence. A new way of being. By means of the parable of the vine and its branches and the proclamation of the wonderful verb remain, repeated several times, Jesus initiates his new story with each one of us called indwelling. He is no longer with us, because he is going back to the Father, yet he remains within us.

- **To assist us in the reading of the passage:**

vv. 1-3: Jesus reveals himself as the true vine, which brings forth good fruit, excellent wine for his Father, who is the vinedresser and who reveals to us, his disciples, the branches, that we must remain united to the vine so as not to die and so as to bear fruit. The pruning, which the Father accomplishes on the branches by means of the Word, is a purification, a joy, a chant.

vv. 4-6: Jesus passes on to his disciples the secret of being able to continue to live in an intimate relationship with him; that is by remaining. As He lives in them and remains in them and is no longer external to them or with them, so also they must remain in Him, inside Him. This is the only way to be completely consoled, to be able to hold on to this life and bear good fruit, that is, love.

v. 7: Once more, Jesus bequeaths the gift of prayer in the heart of his disciples, that most precious and unique pearl, and he tells us that by remaining in Him, we can learn true prayer, the prayer that seeks insistently the gift of the Holy Spirit and knows that it will be granted.

v. 8: Once more, Jesus calls us to Himself, asks us to follow him, to be always his disciples. The remaining brings forth mission, the gift of life for the Father and for the neighbor; if we really remain in Jesus, then we shall also really remain in the midst of our brothers and sisters, as gift and as service. This is the glory of the Father.

The Text:

- **1-3:** "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already made clean by the word that I have spoken to you.
- **4-6:** Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.

- **7:** If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.
- **8:** By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.

A Moment of Silent Prayer

As a branch, I now remain united to the vine, my Lord, and I abandon myself to Him, I allow myself to be overtaken by the sap of his silent and deep voice, which is like living water. Thus I remain in silence and stay close.

A Few Questions

to help me remain, to discover the beauty of the vine, Jesus; to lead me to the Father, to allow Him to take over and labor in me, certain of His good labor as loving vinedresser; and to urge me to enter into the life blood of the Spirit to meet him as the only necessary thing that I must seek untiringly.

- "I am": it is beautiful that the passage begins with these words, which are like a song of joy, of the victory of the Lord, that He loves to sing all the time in the life of each one of us. "I am": He repeats this infinitely, every morning, every evening, at night, while we sleep, even though we are not aware of this. In fact, He really is at our disposal; He is turned towards the Father, towards us, for us. I meditate these words and not only listen to them but allow them to penetrate me, my mind, my innermost memory, my heart, all my feelings and I ruminate on and absorb his Being into my being. In this Word, I now understand that I am not, unless I am in Him and that I cannot become anything unless I remain in Jesus' being. I try to enter into the depths of my being, overcoming fear, crossing the darkness that I find there and I gather those parts of my being, of myself, that are most lifeless. I take them delicately and bring them to Jesus and I hand them over to his "I am".
- The vine recalls to mind wine, that precious and good fruit, and also recalls to mind the covenant that nothing and no one will ever be able to break. Am I willing to remain in that embrace, in that continuous yes of my life thus woven into his? Together with the Psalmist, shall I too raise the chalice of the covenant, calling on the name of the Lord and saying to him, yes, I too love you?
- Jesus calls his Father the vinedresser, a very beautiful term that carries all the force of the love dedicated to working the land. It expresses a bending over the earth, a drawing close of body and being, a prolonged contact, a vital exchange. This is precisely the Father's attitude towards us! However, St. Paul says: "The farmer who has done the hard work should have the first share of the harvest" (2 Tim 2: 6) and St. James reminds us "See how patient a farmer is as he waits for his land to produce precious crops" (Jas 5: 7). Will I, the land, disappoint the patience of the Father who cultivates me every day, turns me over, gets rid of the stones, nourishes me with good fertilizer and builds a hedge all round me to protect me? To whom do I give the fruits of my existence, of my heart, of my mind, of my soul? For whom do I exist, for whom do I decide and choose to live every day, every morning, when I wake up?
- I follow the text carefully and underline two verbs, which occur frequently: "to bear fruit" and "to remain". I understand that these two realities are a symbol of life itself and are woven together, each depending on the other. Only by remaining is it

possible to bear fruit and, really, the only true fruit that we as disciples can bear in this world is precisely to remain. Where do I remain every day, all day? With whom do I remain? Jesus always makes the connection of this verb with that wonderful and enormous particle: "in me". Do I console myself with these two words "in me", that is am I inside, do I live in the depth, do I dig in search of the Lord as one digs for a well (cfr. Gen 26: 18) or for treasure (Pr 2: 4), or else am I outside, always lost among the ways of this world, as far as possible from intimacy, from a relationship from contact with the Lord?

- Twice Jesus reminds us of the reality of his Word and reveals to us that it is his Word that makes us pure and it is his Word that leads us to true prayer. The Word is proclaimed and given as a permanent presence within us. It also has the ability to remain, to make its dwelling place in our heart. However, I must ask myself, what ears do I have to listen to this proclamation of salvation and goodness, which the Lord addresses to me through his Words? Do I allow room to listen in depth to that which the Scripture speaks to me all the time, in the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms and the apostolic Writings? Do I allow the Word of the Lord to find me and overtake me in prayer, or do I prefer to trust in other words, lighter, more human and more like my words? Am I afraid of the voice of the Lord who speaks to me urgently and all the time?

A Key to the Reading

As a branch, I seek to be ever more one with my Vine, that is, the Lord Jesus. Here and now, I drink of his Word the good sap, seeking to penetrate ever deeper so as to absorb the hidden nourishment that transmits to me real life. I pay attention to the words, the verbs, the expressions Jesus uses and which recall other passages of divine Scripture and, thus, I let myself be purified.

- **The meeting with Jesus, the "I am"**

This passage is one of the texts where this strong expression appears, an expression that the Lord addresses to us in order to reveal himself. It is wonderful to walk through the Scriptures in search of other texts similar to this one, where the Lord speaks of himself to us directly, of his deepest essence. When the Lord says and repeats infinitely in a thousand ways, with a thousand nuances "I am". He does not do so in order to annihilate or humiliate us, but only to stress forcefully his overflowing love for us, which desires to make us partake of and live that same life that belongs to Him. When He says "I am", He is also saying "You are" to each one of us, to each son and daughter who is born into this world. It is a fruitful and uninterrupted transmission of being, of essence and I do not wish to let this be in vain. I wish to welcome it and welcome it inside me.

So, I follow the luminous trace of the "I am" and I try to stop at each step. "I am your shield" (Gen 15: 1), "I am the God of Abraham your father" (Gen 24: 26), "I am the Lord who led you and still leads you out of the land of Egypt" (cfr. Es 6: 6) and from the hands of every Pharaoh who will threaten your life, "I am He who heals you" (Es 15: 26). I allow myself to be enlightened by the force of these words, which fulfil the miracle they speak of; they fulfil this miracle to this day, and for me, in this lectio. Then I go on reading in the book of Leviticus where at least 50 times this affirmation of salvation is found: "I am the Lord", and I believe these words and hold on to them with my whole being, my whole heart and say: "Yes, indeed the Lord is my Lord, He and no other!" I note that the Scriptures probe ever deeper. As the journey continues, gradually, the Scriptures penetrate me and lead me to an ever more

intense relationship with the Lord. In fact, the book of Numbers says: "I am the Lord and I live among the people of Israel" (Num 35: 34). "I am" is in the present, He who does not draw apart, does not turn his back to leave; it is He who cares for us from close by, from the inside, as only He can do; I read Isaiah and I receive life: 41: 10; 43: 3; 45: 6 etc.

The holy Gospel is an explosion of being, of presence, of salvation; I run through it letting John lead me: 6: 48; 8: 12; 10: 9. 11; 11: 15; 14: 6; 18: 37. Jesus is the bread, the light, the gate, the shepherd, the resurrection, the way, the truth, the life, the king; and all for me, for us, and so I want to welcome him, know him and love him, and I want to learn, through these words, to say to him: "Lord you are!" It is this "You" that gives meaning to my I that makes of my life a relationship, a communion. I know for certain that only here can I find full joy and live forever.

- **The vineyard, the true vine and its good fruit**

God's vineyard is Israel, a beloved vineyard, a chosen vineyard, a vineyard planted on a fertile hill, in a place where the earth has been cleared afresh, hoed, freed of stones, a protected vineyard, worked, loved, large and one that God himself has planted (cfr. Is 5: 1ff; Ger 2: 21). So loved is this vineyard that the beloved has never ceased to sing the canticle of love for her; strong notes yet sweet at the same time, notes that bear true life, that go across the ancient covenant and come to the new covenant in even clearer notes. At first it was the Father who sang, now it is Jesus, but in both it is the Spirit who is heard, as the Song of Songs says: "The voice of the dove is still heard... and the vineyards spread fragrance" (Songs 2: 12ff). It is the Lord Jesus who draws us, who takes us from the old to the new, from love to love, towards an ever-stronger communion, even to identification: "I am the vine, but you too are in me". Hence it is clear: the vineyard is Israel, is Jesus, is us. Always the same, always new, always chosen and beloved, loved, cared for, protected, visited: visited by rain and visited by the Word, sent by the prophets day by day, visited by the sending of the Son, Love, who expects love, that is, the fruit. "He waited for the grapes to ripen, but every grape was sour" (Is 5: 2); in love, disappointment is always round the corner.

I stop here at this reality, I look inside me, I try to discover the places where I am closed, dry, dead; why has the rain not come? I repeat this word that echoes often through the pages of the Bible: "The Lord waits..." (see Is 30: 18; Lk 13: 6-9). He wants the fruits of conversion (cfr. Mt 3: 8), as he tells us through John, the fruits of the word that hides the listening, the welcoming and the self-control, as the synoptics say (cfr. Mt 13: 23; Mk 4: 20 e Lk 8: 15), the fruits of the Spirit, as Paul explains (cfr. Gal 5: 22). He wants us "to bear fruit in every good work" (Col 1: 10), but above all, it seems to me, the Lord waits and desires "the fruit of the womb" (cfr. Lk 1: 42), that is Jesus, in whom we are truly blessed. In fact, Jesus is the seed that, dying, bears much fruit within us, in our life (Jn 12: 24) and defeats every solitude, every closure, opening us wide to our brothers and sisters. This is the real fruit of conversion, planted in the earth of our bosom; this is to become his disciples and, finally, this is the true glory of the Father.

- **Pruning, a Joyful Purification**

In this passage of the Gospel, the Lord shows me another way of following Him, together with Him. It is the way of purification, of renewal, of resurrection and new life. It is hidden in the term "pruning", but I can better discover it, throw light on it thanks to the Word itself, which is the only master, the only sure guide. The Greek text uses the term "purify" to point to this action of the vinedresser in his vineyard. Certainly, it is true that he prunes, cuts with a knife sharpened by his Word (Heb 4: 12) and, sometimes, wounds us, but it is even truer that it is his love that penetrates ever

deeper in us and thus purifies, washes, refines. Yes, the Lord sits as washer to purify, to make splendid and luminous the gold in his hand (cfr. Mal 3: 3). Jesus brings a new purification, the one promised for so long by the Scriptures and waited for the Messianic times. It is no longer the purification that took place by means of cult, by means of the observance of the law or sacrifices, only a temporary purification, incomplete and figurative. Jesus brings about an intimate, total purification, one of the heart and conscience, the one sung by Ezekiel: "I shall purify you of all your idols, I shall give you a new heart...When I shall have purified you from all your iniquities, I shall bring you back to your cities and your ruins will be rebuilt..." (Ez 36: 25ff. 33). I also read Eph 5: 26 e Tt 2: 14, beautiful and rich texts, which help me better enter into the light of grace of this work of salvation, of this spiritual pruning that the Father works in me.

There is a verse in the Song of Songs that can help my understanding more, it says, "This is the time for singing" (Song 2: 12), however, it uses a verb that means also "pruning, cutting" as well as "singing". Thus pruning is the time for singing, for joy. It is my heart that sings before and in the Word, it is my soul that rejoices for my faith, because I know that through this long but magnificent pilgrimage in the Scriptures, I too will take part in Jesus' life, I too will be united with Him, the pure, the holy, the immaculate Word and that thus united to Him I shall be washed, purified with the infinite purity of His life. Not for me alone, not in order to be alone, but to bear much fruit, to grow leaves and branches that do not wither, to be a branch together with many other branches in the vine of Jesus Christ.

A Moment of Silent Prayer: Psalm 1

A meditation on the joy of one who lives by the Word and, thanks to the Word, bears fruit.

Res. Your Word is my joy, Lord!

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;

but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. Res. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away. Res. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Res.

Closing Prayer

Lord, I still see the light of your Word. The healing force of your voice still rings in the depth of my being! Thank you, O my Vine, my sap. Thank you, O my dwelling where I can and wish to remain. Thank you, O my strength to do, to carry out every task; thank you my Master! You have called me to be a fruitful branch, to be fruit of your love for humankind, to be the wine that makes the heart rejoice. Lord, help me to realize this blessed and true Word of yours. Only thus can I live truly and live truly as you are and remain. Lord, let me not err so that I wish to remain a branch in your vine without the other branches, my brothers and sisters. It would be indeed the sourest and most displeasing fruit.

Lord, I do not know how to pray. Teach me Yourself and let my most beautiful prayer be my life, transformed into a bunch of grapes for the hunger and the thirst, for the joy and company of those who come to the vine, that is, You. Thank you for being the wine of Love!

Monday, April 29, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord God, loving Father, we look for your presence in the temple of nature and in churches built by our hands, and you are there with your people.

But above all, you have made your temple right in our hearts.

God, give us eyes of faith and love to recognize that you live in us with your Son and the Holy Spirit if we keep the word of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Lord forever.

Gospel Reading - John 14: 21-26

Jesus said to his disciples: "Whoever holds to my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me; and whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and reveal myself to him." Judas -- not Judas Iscariot -- said to him, 'Lord, what has happened, that you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?' Jesus replied: Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make a home in him. Anyone who does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not my own: it is the word of the Father who sent me. I have said these things to you while still with you; but the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.

Reflection

As we said at the beginning, chapter 14 of the Gospel of John is a beautiful example of how the catechesis was done in the communities of Asia Minor, at the end of the first century. Through the questions of the disciples and the responses of Jesus, the Christians formed their conscience and found an orientation for their problems. In chapter 14, we find the question of Thomas and the answer of Jesus (Jn 14: 5-7), the question of Philip and the response of Jesus (Jn 14: 8-21), and the question of Judas and the answer of Jesus (Jn 12: 22-26). The last phrase of the answer of Jesus to Philip (Jn 14: 21) forms the first verse of today's Gospel.

- John 14: 21: I shall love him and reveal myself to him. This verse presents the summary of the response of Jesus to Philip. Philip had said: "Show us the Father and then we shall be satisfied!" (Jn 14: 8). Moses had asked God: "Show me your glory!" (Ex 33: 18). God answered: "My face you cannot see, for no human being can see me and survive" (Ex 33: 20). The Father cannot be shown. God lives in inaccessible light (1 Tim 6: 16). "Nobody has ever seen God" (1 Jn 4: 12). But the presence of the Father can be experienced through the experience of love. The First Letter of Saint John says: "He who does not love does not know God because God is Love". Jesus tells Philip: "Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and reveal myself

to him". By observing the commandment of Jesus, which is the commandment to love our neighbor (Jn 15: 17), the person shows his love for Jesus. And whoever loves Jesus, will be loved by the Father and can be certain that the Father will manifest himself to him. In the response to Judas, Jesus will say how this manifestation of the Father will take place in our life.

- John 14: 22: The question of Judas is the question of all. The question of Judas: "Lord, what has happened that you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world?" This question of Judas mirrors a problem which is real even today. Sometimes, among us, Christians, there arises the idea of being better than the others and of being loved by God more than others. Do we attribute to God the distinction among persons?
- John 14: 23-24: The answer of Jesus. The answer of Jesus is simple and profound. He repeats what he had just said to Philip. The problem is not if we, Christians, are loved more by God than others, or that the others are despised by God. This is not the criterion for the preference of the Father. The criterion for the preference of the Father is always the same: love. "If anyone loves me, he will observe my word, and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make a home in him. Anyone who does not love me does not keep my words". Independently of whether the person is Christian or not, the Father manifests himself to all those who observe the commandment of Jesus which is love for neighbor (Jn 15: 17). In what does the manifestation of the Father consist? The response to this question is engraved in the heart of humanity, in the universal human experience. Observe the life of the persons who practice love and make of their life a gift for others. Examine their experience, independently of religion, of social class, of race or color, the practice of love gives us a profound peace and it is a great joy that they succeed to live and bear together pain and suffering. This experience is the reflection of the manifestation of the Father in the life of the person. It is the realization of the promise: "I and the Father will come to him and make our home in him."
- John 14: 15-16: The promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus ends his response to Judas saying: I have said these things to you while still with you. Jesus communicates everything which he has heard from the Father (Jn 15: 15). His words are a source of life and they should be meditated, deepened and updated constantly in the light of the always new reality which surrounds us. For this constant meditation of his words, Jesus promises us the help of the Holy Spirit: "The Consoler, the Holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you."

Personal Questions

- Jesus says: We will come to him and make our home in him. How do I experience this promise?
- We have the promise of the gift of the Spirit to help us understand the word of Jesus. Do I invoke the light of the Spirit when I prepare myself to read and meditate the Scripture?

Concluding Prayer

Day after day I shall bless you,

I shall praise your name for ever and ever. Great is Yahweh and worthy of all praise,

his greatness beyond all reckoning. (Ps 145: 2-3)

Tuesday, April 30, 2024

Easter Time

Opening Prayer

Lord our God, almighty Father,

you have absolute power over the world, and yet you respect the freedom of people, even of those who persecute your faithful.

Make us realize that our faith does not protect us against the evil which people bring upon one another, but that you want us to build according to your plan a kingdom of justice, love and peace.

Help our faith to stand the test when our meager efforts fail.

We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 14: 27-31a

Jesus said to his disciples: "Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace which the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.

You heard me say: I am going away and shall return. If you loved me you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you this now, before it happens, so that when it does happen you may believe.

I shall not talk to you much longer, because the prince of this world is on his way. He has no power over me, but the world must recognize that I love the Father and that I act just as the Father commanded. Come now, let us go.

Reflection

- Here in John 14: 27, begins the farewell of Jesus and at the end of chapter 14, he ends the conversation saying: "Come now, let us go!" (Jn 14: 31). But instead of leaving the room, Jesus continues to speak in three other chapters: 15, 16, and 17. If we read these three chapters, at the beginning of chapter 18, we see the following phrase: "After he had said all this, Jesus left with his disciples and crossed the Kidron valley where there was a garden into which he went with his disciples" (Jn 18: 1). In Jn 18: 1, there is the continuation of Jn 14: 31. The Gospel of John is like a beautiful building constructed slowly, rock on top of rock, brick upon brick. Here and there, there are signs of rearrangement or adaptation. In some way, all the texts, all the bricks, form part of the building and are the Word of God for us.
- John 14: 27: The gift of Peace. Jesus communicates his peace to the disciples. The same peace will be given after the Resurrection (Jn 20: 29). This peace is an expression of the manifestation of the Father, as Jesus had said before (Jn 14: 21). The peace of Jesus is the source of joy that he communicates to us (Jn 15: 11; 16: 20, 22, 24; 17: 13). It is a peace which is different from the peace which the world gives us, diverse from Pax Romana. At the end of the first century the Pax Romana was

maintained by force and violent repression against the rebellious movements. Pax Romana guaranteed the institutionalized inequality between the Roman citizens and the slaves. This is not the peace of the Kingdom of God. The Peace which Jesus communicates is what in the Old Testament is called Shalom. It is the complete organization of the whole life around the values of justice, of fraternity and of equality.

- John 14: 28-29: The reason why Jesus returns to the Father. Jesus returns to the Father in order to be able to return immediately. He will say to Mary Magdalene: "Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father" (Jn 20: 17). Going up to the Father, he will return through the Holy Spirit that he will send (cfr. Jn 20: 22). Without the return toward the Father he will not be able to stay with us through the Spirit.
- John 14: 30-31a: That the world may know that I love the Father. Jesus had ended the last conversation with the disciples. The prince of this world wanted to impose himself on the destiny of Jesus. Jesus will die. In reality, the Prince, the Tempter, the Devil, has no power over Jesus. The world will know that Jesus loves the Father. This is the great witness of Jesus which can impel the world to believe in him. In the announcement of the Good News it is not a question of diffusing a doctrine, or of imposing a Canon Law, or of uniting all in one organization. It is a question; above all, of living and radiating what the human being desires and has deeper in his heart: love. Without this, the doctrine, the Law, the celebration will be only a wig on a bald head.
- John 14: 31b: Come now, let us go. These are the last words of Jesus, the expression of his decision to be obedient to the Father and of revealing his love. In the Eucharist, at the moment of the consecration, in some countries, it is said: "On the day before his passion, voluntarily accepted". In another place Jesus says: "This is why the Father loves me: because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me: I lay it down of my own free will, and as I have power to lay it down so I have power to take it up again, and this is the command that I have received from my Father." (Jn 10: 17-18).

Personal Questions

- Jesus says: "I give you my peace." How do I contribute to the construction of peace in my family and in my community?
- Looking into the mirror of the obedience of Jesus toward the Father, on which point could I improve my obedience to the Father?

Concluding Prayer

All your creatures shall thank you, Yahweh, and your faithful shall bless you.

They shall speak of the glory of your kingship and tell of your might. (Ps 145: 10-11)