

First Impressions 5th SUNDAY OF EASTER -C-

Acts 14: 21-27 Psalm 145 Revelation 21: 1-5 John 13: 31-33, 34-35

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Why are we backing up, looking in the rear view mirror? Don't you think today's gospel is a strange choice for an Easter season reading? I bet people in the pews in churches that are still decorated with lilies and the Paschal candle will think so when they hear the opening line, "When Judas had left...." Why are we at the Last Supper in the narrative and Easter in the pews? I thought Jesus' suffering and death were over and now we Easter people are singing our "alleluias."

Then there's Jesus' talk about being "glorified": "Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and God will glorify him at once." First, we have a setting that seems chronologically misplaced; then all this talk about "being glorified." It sounds very convoluted. Would you blame people in the pews for their confused looks? The preacher has work to do today to unpack what, on first impression, seems like obfuscation.

Jesus' language about "glory" is not detached and out of touch with reality—though sometimes people who use the word a lot do seem that way. Context is always important when we interpret a biblical passage. Just prior to today's selection Jesus predicted, "I tell you solemnly one of you will betray me" (13:21). Judas eats the morsel of food Jesus offers him and then leaves the table. "No sooner had Judas eaten the morsel than he went out. It was night" (13:30). After today's passage Jesus predicts Peter's denials (13:38). It is night and it doesn't get much darker than that, when one's table companions and intimates betray or deny you. Where's the "glory" when hand-picked followers can't even stand by you at your greatest hour of need?

Jesus begins speaking by saying, "Now...." This doesn't seem like the most opportune time to speak of being glorified, when the "Now" is a moment surrounded by treachery and disappointment. It's obvious Jesus' sense of "glory" doesn't look like an artist's rendition of a typical light-enhanced religious scene. Nor does the moment seem to be appropriate for a composer to write accompanying

music with trumpets and kettle drums. We expect more glow with our glory. But, while humans have failed at this crucial moment in Jesus' life, neither he nor his Father will. Nothing seems able to thwart what is coming----God's revelation of love for all humankind. "Now" is glorious because it is the moment when God's love shines through human sin and darkness. It may be "night," but God is shining another light on the matter of human alienation from God and from one another.

Jesus is quite clear that he is not a reluctant passenger or victim dragged into God's plan. After he finishes his last discourse to his disciples at table they go to the garden (18:1 ff.), where he is arrested. John does not narrate an "agony in the garden" scene. Instead he shows Jesus very much in charge of his fate and of one mind and heart with God's plan. No wonder when he says, "Now is the Son of Man glorified..." that even amid the seeming failure of his life and mission, he communicates a sense of accomplishment. Can one even say, satisfaction and anticipation?

Before Jesus departs he says, "I give you a new commandment: love one another." It's not really new, is it? Certainly the bible speaks of loving one another. What's new about Jesus' call to love at this moment? Well the context certainly shines a light on the nature of the love he is asking his disciples to have. It is a love that is not turned off or restricted, even when one is betrayed or let down by those closest to us. It is a love that is not extinguished under trial and when one is treated unjustly. It is a love even for enemies and, in the face of opposition, speaks the truth—which Jesus will soon do at his trial.

"Now"--- could mean----- "now" Jesus is going to show the nature of the love his disciples should have for one another. "Now" they will see what God's love for the world looks like and "now" they are invited to follow. But neither they nor we can imitate the love Jesus reveals to us. Not on our own. So, "now" he will love us to the end and, as we have been hearing in previous Easter gospels, "now" he will rise from the dead and "now" give his Spirit to his fearful and hesitant disciples. After his resurrection Jesus will return and breathe his Spirit into the disciples. Soon we will celebrate that even on Pentecost and be reminded that the Spirit we have received is the very one that spirited Jesus' love for the world and makes our imitating him possible. His Spirit enables us to love as he did. That is why the love he calls us to is a "new commandment." The world hasn't seen anything like it before and certainly needs it ---"Now."

What better time to love, Jesus seems to be saying, then “Now.” Not because we feel kindly or warm towards another, but because a new age has begun through Jesus’ life, death, resurrection and return to his Father. A love we would have found impossible to live on our own, is now possible to us. The new age inaugurated by Jesus should be marked by the love Christians have. If we love as Jesus loved us then, “all will know that you are my disciples.”

At first, this love Jesus speaks of seems narrow and restrictive. He is addressing his disciples and says, “love one another.” This love may seem insular and applicable just to an inner circle of his followers. Is he telling us that the sacrificial love he calls us to applies only to those around us in the pews? No, because we know from other parts of John’s gospel that Jesus’ mission of love includes an outreach to the world (10:16). Jesus also told us that God, “so loved the world...” (3:16). Nevertheless, Jesus, surrounded by those closest to him, does urge them to “love one another,” as he has loved them. He wants us to be deeply united with him and one another in love. If he has laid down one commandment it is this one about love. A loving community has an evangelistic effect on others. What more articulate proclamation of the gospel can there be than a group of very diverse people drawn together, not by similarities in education, economic status, neighbor, citizenship, race, etc., but by God’s freeing love for them and their manifesting that love for one another? Such a community couldn’t help but draw others to it and to One who is the source of their universal love.

If there is any reading from the Book of Revelation familiar to us, it’s today’s, with its promise of “a new heaven and a new earth.” We can’t wait for it to happen! When will the “heavenly city, a new Jerusalem,” come from God? We believe our world and human history will end someday, when God will renew and transform our reality into a “new heaven and a new earth.” But how long must we wait for the completion and renewal of all creation to finally happen? Amid all the world’s agonies, including the recent killing of those teachers and students at Virginia Tech, the daily suicide bombings in Iraq, the ongoing ravages of AIDS in Africa, etc, how long must we wait for it all to be finished? Jesus, gathered with his disciples around the table the night before he died, didn’t leave a calendar behind with the date of his return circled in red. So, we don’t know the day or the hour when the promise is fulfilled and all things made new. I saw a cartoon: a street preacher is standing on a corner in front of a bar holding a sign that reads, “The end is near.”

A business man, entering the bar says to the preacher, “Do I have time for a quick one?” People who claimed they knew the day and the hour have been proved wrong as the world continues on its sometimes crazy and dizzying path.

Some say there is nothing we can do to hasten a “new heaven and a new earth,” that it is in God’s hands and when God is ready it will happen. What we must do, in this view, is to be prepared so the gates to the new Jerusalem will be open for us. Others hold that “a new heaven and a new earth” will come when we have properly prepared the world for their arrival: when we have done our work to receive Christ, he will come. Oh boy, have we a lot of work to do! Whichever view we favor, in the light of the gospel, the work before us is clear: inspired by the Spirit we must love the way Jesus loves. Then, all we can do is wait and hope.

I wonder if the Revelation reading doesn’t have special appeal to exiles, especially in the light of when and by whom it was written? The book seems to have been written by a Jewish Christian who fled Palestine at the time of the rebellion against Rome (66-70 A.D.). Someone longing to return to a better, less conflicted and more secure home, could easily have penned images about a “new Jerusalem”—a place made holy by God’s dwelling “with the human race.”

For all of us who feel exiled because we have been displaced from our home and land of our birth; or, because, even though we were born in this place, we feel like strangers in a foreign land with its ungodly ways—for such exiles as we gathered in worship today, the Book of Revelation holds out hope and sustenance. Someday...someday.... Meanwhile, we continue going about the ways Jesus taught us, waiting in hope and loving one another.

A NEW PSALM

On this day and every day
Let us give praise to our God-
Why else did Love create us?
Why else are we waiting in Jerusalem?

Israelites of the New Covenant

Awake!

Love approaches, asking,
“Are you my Beloved?”

See! The heavens are glimpsed,
In the thin spaces
Intersecting heaven and earth
By the humble of heart.

Given a new voice,
Turning to one another,
Let us joyfully proclaim
The Good News!

For this brother of ours,
Is the velvet hammer of
Compassion and mercy,
Vanquishing death’s black hole.

We are given a new voice,
By the one
Who has proved faithful to us
Through death.

To the holy one of Israel,
Who brings to us
The fire of dimensionless Pentecost-
In thanksgiving. Amen

—Garth Stanton, “Journeying to Jerusalem: From Epiphany to Easter, 2007”
(private printing)

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QUOTABLE

That is the way to make Jesus present at all times. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (v.35). Jesus will be recognized if we love as he did. That is, total love which excludes no one, by way of a special solidarity with the insignificant and the oppressed, keeping the reign of God always present and clearly denouncing those who are responsible for the injustice and mistreatment of the poor. “As I have loved you”; without double-talk, without fearing the anger of the powerful, without seeking honors or convenience and without conniving silence. We should remember all of that to make Jesus’ concrete love the model of our speech and our commitment before the challenges presented by the harsh reality of our country and our continent.

Gustavo Gutierrez, SHARING THE WORD THROUGH THE LITURGICAL YEAR. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, ISBN 1-57075-138-2, page 102.

JUSTICE NOTES

“God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (*Revelation 7:14b-17*)

Today’s Second Reading from the Book of Revelation tells us that “every tear will be wiped away”. But what are we to do with this Easter promise of Life in the face of so much death in our world? In his Easter message, Pope Benedict named just a few of the horrors in our world for which countless tears are being shed by God’s children, our brothers and sisters.

“How many wounds, how much suffering there is in the world! Natural calamities and human tragedies that cause innumerable victims and enormous material destruction ... the scourge of hunger, of incurable diseases, of terrorism and kidnapping of people, of the thousand faces of violence ... of contempt for life, of the violation of human rights and the exploitation of persons. ...peace is sorely needed: in Sri Lanka...Darfur ...Afghanistan ... the Middle East, and in Iraq, torn apart by continual slaughter...

The Pope continues with these words:

“Christ is risen and he is alive among us. It is he who is the hope of a better future... United to him and ready to offer our lives for our brothers, let us become apostles of peace, messengers of a joy that does not fear pain – the joy of the Resurrection” (Pope Benedict XVI ,Easter Message 2007)

“Easter declares that God is neither a product of our best selves (our best hopes and dreams) nor is God limited by our worst nightmares. **Resurrection is God being God.** In the face of human destruction, in the face of human rejection, God cannot and will not be less than God. God will not be mocked. God cannot be defeated. Newness, wholeness, and fullness of life will define holiness now and in the world to come. **Resurrection is God in a single moment of glory reinventing everything and then inviting us along for the ride.**” (*Wrestling with Presence, Reflections for Lent: Pax Christi USA*)

What can I do?

We can open our hearts and our prayers to the suffering and tears of the world.

We can remind each other, when it’s hard to remember, that Easter has happened and continues to happen, all around us, within us and among us. We are called to be witnesses to this. Rejoice!

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

A special request this week. I visit a young man on Raleigh’s death row. He has been there since March, 18, 1999. He gets little mail and seldom a visit. His parents live out of state. He could use some mail these days. Thanks.

Please write to:.....

Lyle May #0580028

Central Prison

1300 Western Blvd.

Raleigh, NC 27606

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