



Lectio Divina

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Saturday, April 1, 2023

Season of Lent

Opening Prayer

Lord God, creator and Father of all, your sons and daughters are still scattered and divided: Christians and non-Christians, various Churches and sects claiming exclusive rights on your Son, and each of them full of factions.

Make us dream again the dream which you alone can make possible: that we can all be one if we believe and follow him who died to unite all that is scattered, Jesus Christ, our Lord forever.

Gospel Reading – John 11: 45-56

Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees to tell them what Jesus had done.

Then the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting. 'Here is this man working all these signs,' they said, 'and what action are we taking? If we let him go on in this way everybody will believe in him, and the Romans will come and suppress the Holy Place and our nation.'

One of them, Caiaphas, the high priest that year, said, 'You do not seem to have grasped the situation at all; you fail to see that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish.' He did not speak in his own person, but as high priest of that year he was prophesying that Jesus was to die for the nation and not for the nation only, but also to gather together into one the scattered children of God.

From that day onwards they were determined to kill him. So Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews, but left the district for a town called Ephraim, in the country bordering on the desert, and stayed there with his disciples. The Jewish Passover was drawing near, and many of the country people who had gone up to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves were looking out for Jesus, saying to one another as they stood about in the Temple, 'What do you think? Will he come to the festival or not?'

Reflection

The Gospel today gives the last part of the long episode of the resurrection of Lazarus in Bethany, in the house of Martha and Mary (Jn 11: 1-56). The resurrection of Lazarus is the seventh sign (miracle) of Jesus in John's Gospel and is also the high and decisive point of the revelation which he made of God and of himself.

The small community of Bethany, where Jesus liked to go, mirrors the situation and the lifestyle of the small community of the Beloved Disciple at the end of the first century in Asia Minor. Bethany means "The House of the poor." They were poor communities, poor people, Martha means "Lady" (coordinator): a woman coordinated the community. Lazarus means "God helps": the community which was poor expected everything from God. Mary means "loved by Yahweh: she was the beloved disciple, image of the community. The episode of the resurrection of Lazarus communicated this certainty: Jesus is the source of life for the community of the poor. Jesus is the source of life for all those who believe in Him.

John 11: 45-46: The repercussion of the Seventh Sign among the people. After the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11: 1-44), there is the description of the repercussion of this sign among the people. The people were divided; “many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what he did, believed in him.” But some of them went to the Pharisees to tell them what Jesus had done.

The latter denounced him. In order to be able to understand this reaction of one part of the population it is necessary to become aware that half of the population of Jerusalem depended completely on the Temple so as to be able to live and to survive. Because of this, it would have been difficult for them to support an unknown prophet from Galilee who criticized the Temple and the authority. This also explains why some even were ready to inform the authority.

- John 11: 47-53: The repercussion of the Seventh Sign among those in authority. The news of the resurrection of Lazarus increased the popularity of Jesus. This is why the religious leaders convoked a council meeting, the Synedrium, the maximum authority, to discern getting rid of him; because “this man works many signs. If we let him go on this way everybody will believe in him and the Romans will come and suppress the Holy Place and our nation”. They were afraid of the Romans. And this because in the past it had been shown many times by the Roman invasions in the year 64 before Christ until the time of Jesus, that the Romans repressed with great violence any attempt of popular rebellion. (Cf. Ac 5: 35-37). In the case of Jesus, the Roman reaction could have lead to the loss of everything, even of the Temple and of the privileged position of the priests. Because of this, Caiaphas, the High Priest, decides: “It is better that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish”. And the Evangelist comments: “He did not speak this in his own person, but as high priest of that year, he was prophesying that Jesus was to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather together into one the scattered children of God”. Thus, beginning at that moment, the chief priests concerned because Jesus’ authority was growing and motivated by the fear of the Romans, decided to kill Jesus.
- John 11: 54-56: The repercussion of the seventh sign in the life of Jesus. The final result is that Jesus had to live as a clandestine. “So Jesus no longer went about openly among the Jews; he left the district and went to a region near the desert, to a city called Ephraim and stayed there with his disciples”. The Jewish Passover was drawing near.

At this time of the year, the population of Jerusalem tripled because of the great number of pilgrims. The conversation was all around Jesus: “What do you think, will he come to the festival or not?” In the same way, at the time that the Gospel was written at the end of the first century, the time of the persecution of the Emperor Domitian (from 81 to 96), the Christian communities who lived in the service of others were obliged to live as clandestine.

A key to understand the seventh sign of the resurrection of Lazarus. Lazarus was sick. His sisters Martha and Mary sent someone to call Jesus: “The one whom you love is sick!” (Jn 11: 3, 5). Jesus responds to the request and explains to the disciples: “This sickness will not end in death, but it is for God’s glory so that through it the Son of God may be glorified” (Jn 11: 4) In John’s Gospel, the glorification of Jesus comes through his death (Jn 12: 23; 17: 1). One of the causes of his condemnation to death was the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn 11: 50; 12: 10). Many Jews were in the house of Martha and Mary to console them because of the loss of their brother. The Jews, representatives of the Ancient Covenant, only know how to console. They do not give new life. Jesus is the one who brings new life! Thus, on one side, the threat of death against Jesus! On the other, Jesus who overcomes death! In this context of

conflict between life and death the seventh sign of the resurrection of Lazarus takes place. Martha says that she believes in the resurrection. The Pharisees and the majority of the people say that they believe in the Resurrection (Ac 23: 6-10; Mk 12: 18). They believed, but they did not reveal it. It was only faith in the resurrection at the end of time and not in the present resurrection in history, here and now. This ancient faith did not renew life. It is not enough to believe in the resurrection which will come at the end of time, but it is necessary to believe in the Resurrection already present here and now in the person of Jesus and in those who believe in Jesus. On these people, death no longer has any power, because Jesus "is the resurrection and the life". Even without seeing the concrete sign of the resurrection of Lazarus, Martha confesses her faith: "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of the living God who was to come into the world" (Jn 11: 27).

Jesus orders that the stone be removed. Martha reacts: "Lord, by now he will smell!" This is the fourth day since he died!" (Jn 11: 39). Once again Jesus presents the challenge asking to believe in the resurrection, here and now, as a sign of the glory of God: "Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" (Jn 11: 40). They removed the stone. Before the open tomb and before the unbelief of the persons, Jesus addresses himself to the Father. In his prayer, first of all, he gives thanks: "Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I myself knew that you hear me always!" (Jn 11: 41-42). Jesus knows the Father and trusts him. But now he asks for a sign because of the multitude, which is around him, so that the people can believe that he, Jesus, has been sent by the Father. Then he cried out in a loud voice: "Lazarus, come out!" Lazarus came out (Jn 11: 43-44). This is the triumph of life over death, of faith over unbelief. A farmer commented: "It is up to us to remove the stone. And it is up to God to resurrect the community. There are people who do not know how to remove the stone, and because of this their community has no life!"

Personal Questions

- What does it mean concretely, for me to believe in the resurrection?
- Part of the people accepted Jesus, and part did not. Today part of the people accept the renewal of the Church and part do not. And you?

Concluding Prayer

For you are my hope, Lord, my trust, Yahweh, since boyhood. On you I have relied since my birth,

since my mother's womb you have been my portion, the constant theme of my praise.
(Sal 71: 5-6)

Sunday, April 2, 2023

Palm Sunday

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.

Suggestions for Holy Week

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week, a week that is different from all others. We are confronted with the deepest of all mysteries of our faith, the supreme revelation of the love of God manifested in Jesus (Rom 8:38-39).

In the Old Testament, at times of crisis, the people went back to meditating on and re-reading Exodus. In the New Testament we go back to the exodus represented by the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. For the community of Christians of all times, the narrative of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus is the source where we renew our faith, hope and love.

Many times, from the time of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), Matthew's Gospel states that the aim of the New Law is love and mercy (Mt 5:43-48; 7:12; 9:13; 12:7; 22:34-40). Now, in this final section of the passion, death and resurrection, he describes how Jesus put love into practice, bringing the Law to fulfilment (Mt 5:17).

A Reading of the Passion and Death of Jesus – Matthew 26: 14-27; 27: 1-66

A Key to the Reading:

In Holy Week, during the reading of the Passion and Death of Jesus, it is not fitting to take an attitude of research and rational investigation. It is more fitting to remain silent. Read the text several times, taking as only guide the short titles which seek to be a key to help us feel the text and experience again the love of God revealed in the attitude of Jesus towards those who capture him, insult him, torture him and kill him. As we read, let us not think only of Jesus, but also of the millions and millions of human beings who today are imprisoned, tortured, insulted and killed.

- Matthew 26: 14-16: Judas' betrayal
Love of money leads a friend to betray Jesus
14 Then one of the Twelve, the man called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, 'What are you prepared to give me if I hand him over to you?' They paid him thirty silver pieces, 16 and from then onwards he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.
- Matthew 26: 17-19: The preparation for the Paschal Supper
Preparing well the last meeting with friends
17 Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus to say, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' 18 He said, 'Go to a certain man in the city and say to him, "The Master says: My time is near. It is at your house that I am keeping Passover with my disciples." ' 19 The disciples did what Jesus told them and prepared the Passover.

- Matthew 26: 20-25: The proclamation of Judas' betrayal
Even though Jesus knows everything, he sits at table with the betrayer
 20 When evening came he was at table with the Twelve. 21 And while they were eating, he said, 'In truth I tell you, one of you is about to betray me.' 22 They were greatly distressed and started asking him in turn, 'Not me, Lord, surely?' 23 He answered, 'Someone who has dipped his hand into the dish with me will betray me. 24 The Son of man is going to his fate, as the scriptures say he will, but alas for that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! Better for that man if he had never been born!' 25 Judas, who was to betray him, asked in his turn, 'Not me, Rabbi, surely?' Jesus answered, 'It is you who say it.'
- Matthew 26: 26-29: The institution of the Eucharist
Between the betrayal of the one and the denial of the other, glows a sign of love
 26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples. 'Take it and eat,' he said, 'this is my body.' 27 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he handed it to them saying, 'Drink from this, all of you, 28 for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 From now on, I tell you, I shall never again drink wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father.'
- Matthew 26: 30-35: The proclamation of the denial by Peter
Even though Peter breaks away from Jesus, Jesus does not break away from Peter
 30 After the psalms had been sung they left for the Mount of Olives. 31 Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away from me tonight, for the scripture says: I shall strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered, 32 but after my resurrection I shall go ahead of you to Galilee.' 33 At this, Peter said to him, 'Even if all fall away from you, I will never fall away.' 34 Jesus answered him, 'In truth I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will have disowned me three times.' 35 Peter said to him, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And all the disciples said the same.
- Matthew 26: 36-46: The agony in the Garden of Olives
Jesus chooses fidelity rather than flight
 36 Then Jesus came with them to a plot of land called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Stay here while I go over there to pray.' 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee with him. And he began to feel sadness and anguish. 38 Then he said to them, 'My soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here and stay awake with me.' 39 And going on a little further he fell on his face and prayed. 'My Father,' he said, 'if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as you, not I, would have it.' 40 He came back to the disciples and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, 'So you had not the strength to stay awake with me for one hour? 41 Stay awake and pray not to be put to the test. The spirit is willing enough, but human nature is weak.' 42 Again, a second time, he went away and prayed: 'My Father,' he said, 'if this cup cannot pass by, but I must drink it, your will be done!' 43 And he came back again and found them sleeping, their eyes were so heavy. 44 Leaving them there, he went away again and prayed for the third time, repeating the same words. 45 Then he came back to the disciples and said to them, 'You can sleep on now and have your rest. Look, the hour has come when the Son of man is to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. 46 Get up! Let us go! Look, my betrayer is not far away.'
- Matthew 26: 47-56: Jesus' capture in the Garden
Even though he was innocent and good, Jesus is considered a bandit and criminal

47 And suddenly while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, appeared, and with him a large number of men armed with swords and clubs, sent by the chief priests and elders of the people. 48 Now the traitor had arranged a sign with them saying, 'The one I kiss, he is the man. Arrest him.' 49 So he went up to Jesus at once and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi,' and kissed him. 50 Jesus said to him, 'My friend, do what you are here for.' Then they came forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. 51 And suddenly, one of the followers of Jesus grasped his sword and drew it; he struck the high priest's servant and cut off his ear. 52 Jesus then said, 'Put your sword back, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. 53 Or do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, who would promptly send more than twelve legions of angels to my defense? 54 But then, how would the scriptures be fulfilled that say this is the way it must be?' 55 It was at this time that Jesus said to the crowds, 'Am I a bandit, that you had to set out to capture me with swords and clubs? I sat teaching in the Temple day after day and you never laid a hand on me.' 56 Now all this happened to fulfil the prophecies in scripture. Then all the disciples deserted him and ran away.

- Matthew 26: 57-68: Jesus before the Sanhedrin

The decision, which has already been made, of sentencing Jesus to death, is given a semblance of legality

57 The men who had arrested Jesus led him off to the house of Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. 58 Peter followed him at a distance right to the high priest's palace, and he went in and sat down with the attendants to see what the end would be. 59 The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for evidence against Jesus, however false, on which they might have him executed. 60 But they could not find any, though several lying witnesses came forward. Eventually two came forward 61 and made a statement, 'This man said, "I have power to destroy the Temple of God and in three days build it up." ' 62 The high priest then rose and said to him, 'Have you no answer to that? What is this evidence these men are bringing against you?' 63 But Jesus was silent. And the high priest said to him, 'I put you on oath by the living God to tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.' 64 Jesus answered him, 'It is you who say it. But, I tell you that from this time onward you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.' 65 Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed. What need of witnesses have we now? There! You have just heard the blasphemy. 66 What is your opinion?' They answered, 'He deserves to die.' 67 Then they spat in his face and hit him with their fists; others said as they struck him, 68 'Prophecy to us, Christ! Who hit you then?'

- Matthew 26: 69-75: Peter's denial

At the moment of trial, Peter, the leader, denies knowing Jesus

69 Meanwhile Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard, and a servant-girl came up to him saying, 'You, too, were with Jesus the Galilean.' 70 But he denied it in front of them all. 'I do not know what you are talking about,' he said. 71 When he went out to the gateway another servant-girl saw him and said to the people there, 'This man was with Jesus the Nazarene.' 72 And again, with an oath, he denied it, 'I do not know the man.' 73 A little later the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'You are certainly one of them too! Why, your accent gives you away.' 74 Then he started cursing and swearing, 'I do not know the man.' And at once the cock crowed, 75 and Peter remembered what Jesus had said, 'Before the cock crows you will have disowned me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly.

- Matthew 27: 1-2: Jesus is led before Pilate

It is not the Jewish people but it is the élite who lead Jesus to his death

1 When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people met in council to bring about the death of Jesus. 2 They had him bound and led him away to hand him over to Pilate, the governor.

- Matthew 27: 3-10: The death of Judas

A little of Judas lives in each one of us

3 When he found that Jesus had been condemned, then Judas, his betrayer, was filled with remorse and took the thirty silver pieces back to the chief priests and elders 4 saying, 'I have sinned. I have betrayed innocent blood.' They replied, 'What is that to us? That is your concern.' 5 And flinging down the silver pieces in the sanctuary he made off and went and hanged himself. 6 The chief priests picked up the silver pieces and said, 'It is against the Law to put this into the treasury; it is blood-money.' 7 So they discussed the matter and with it bought the potter's field as a graveyard for foreigners, 8 and this is why the field is still called the Field of Blood. 9 The word spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was then fulfilled: And they took the thirty silver pieces, the sum at which the precious One was priced by the children of Israel, 10 and they gave them for the potter's field, just as the Lord directed me.

- Matthew 27: 11-26: Jesus before Pilate

Like the Servant of Yahweh, Jesus remains silent before those to accuse him

11 Jesus, then, was brought before the governor, and the governor put to him this question, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus replied, 'It is you who say it.' 12 But when he was accused by the chief priests and the elders he refused to answer at all. 13 Pilate then said to him, 'Do you not hear how many charges they have made against you?' 14 But to the governor's amazement, he offered not a word in answer to any of the charges. 15 At festival time it was the governor's practice to release a prisoner for the people, anyone they chose. 16 Now there was then a notorious prisoner whose name was Barabbas. 17 So when the crowd gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Which do you want me to release for you:

Barabbas, or Jesus who is called Christ?' 18 For Pilate knew it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. 19 Now as he was seated in the chair of judgement, his wife sent him a message, 'Have nothing to do with that upright man; I have been extremely upset today by a dream that I had about him.' 20 The chief priests and the elders, however, had persuaded the crowd to demand the release of Barabbas and the execution of Jesus. 21 So when the governor spoke and asked them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' they said, 'Barabbas.' 22 Pilate said to them, 'But in that case, what am I to do with Jesus who is called Christ?' They all said, 'Let him be crucified!' 23 He asked, 'But what harm has he done?' But they shouted all the louder, 'Let him be crucified!' 24 Then Pilate saw that he was making no impression, that in fact a riot was imminent. So he took some water, washed his hands in front of the crowd and said, 'I am innocent of this man's blood. It is your concern.' 25 And the people, every one of them, shouted back, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' 26 Then he released Barabbas for them. After having Jesus scourged, he handed him over to be crucified.

- Matthew 27: 27-31: Jesus is crowned with thorns

To undress, torture and strike someone is what humiliates that person most

27 Then the governor's soldiers took Jesus with them into the Praetorium and collected the whole cohort round him. 28 And they stripped him and put a scarlet cloak round him, 29 and having twisted some thorns into a crown they put this on his head and placed a reed in his right hand. To make fun of him they knelt to him

saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' 30 And they spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head with it. 31 And when they had finished making fun of him, they took off the cloak and dressed him in his own clothes and led him away to crucifixion.

- Matthew 27: 32-38: Jesus is crucified

The law says that the one hanging on a cross is "cursed by God" (Dt 21: 23)

32 On their way out, they came across a man from Cyrene, called Simon, and enlisted him to carry his cross. 33 When they had reached a place called Golgotha, that is, the place of the skull, 34 they gave him wine to drink mixed with gall, which he tasted but refused to drink. 35 When they had finished crucifying him they shared out his clothing by casting lots, 36 and then sat down and stayed there keeping guard over him. 37 Above his head was placed the charge against him; it read: 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' 38 Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left.

- Matthew 27: 39-44: Jesus is insulted

Hanging, naked, bared before all, defenceless, without any right

39 The passers-by jeered at him; they shook their heads 40 and said, 'So you would destroy the Temple and in three days rebuild it! Then save yourself if you are God's son and come down from the cross!' 41 The chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him in the same way, 42 with the words, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He has put his trust in God; now let God rescue him if he wants him. For he did say, "I am God's son." ' 44 Even the bandits who were crucified with him taunted him in the same way.

- Matthew 27: 45-56: The death of Jesus

"My God! Why have you forsaken me?" He dies letting out a cry

45 From the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. 46 And about the ninth hour, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, '*Eli, eli, lama sabachthan?*' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' 47 When some of those who stood there heard this, they said, 'The man is calling on Elijah,' 48 and one of them quickly ran to get a sponge which he filled with vinegar and, putting it on a reed, gave it him to drink. 49 But the rest of them said, 'Wait! And see if Elijah will come to save him.' 50 But Jesus, again crying out in a loud voice, yielded up his spirit. 51 And suddenly, the veil of the Sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom, the earth quaked, the rocks were split, 52 the tombs opened, and the bodies of many holy people rose from the dead, 53 and these, after his resurrection, came out of the tombs, entered the holy city and appeared to a number of people. 54 The centurion, together with the others guarding Jesus, had seen the earthquake and all that was taking place, and they were terrified and said, 'In truth this man was son of God.' 55 And many women were there, watching from a distance, the same women who had followed Jesus from Galilee and looked after him. 56 Among them were Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.

- Matthew 27: 57-61: Jesus is buried

Jesus is not even buried decently

57 When it was evening, there came a rich man of Arimathea, called Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. 58 This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be handed over. 59 So Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean shroud 60 and put it in his own new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a large stone across the entrance of the tomb

and went away. 61 Now Mary of Magdala and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulchre.

- Matthew 27: 62-66: The guard of the tumult

Darkness, even the most intense, cannot extinguish life

62 Next day, that is, when Preparation Day was over, the chief priests and the Pharisees went in a body to Pilate 63 and said to him, 'Your Excellency, we recall that this impostor said, while he was still alive, "After three days I shall rise again." 64 Therefore give the order to have the sepulchre kept secure until the third day, for fear his disciples come and steal him away and tell the people, "He has risen from the dead." This last piece of fraud would be worse than what went before.' 65 Pilate said to them, 'You may have your guard; go and make all as secure as you know how.' 66 So they went and made the sepulchre secure, putting seals on the stone and mounting a guard.

Some Thoughts

to help us meditate and pray.

The Death of Jesus:

From midday to three in the afternoon, it is dark over the whole earth. Even nature feels the effect of the agony and death of Jesus! Hanging on the cross, deprived of everything, a lament escapes from his lips: "*Eli! Eli! Lama Sabactan?*" That is: "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" This is the first sentence of Psalm 22(21). Jesus goes into his death praying, expressing the forsakenness he feels. He prays in Hebrew. The soldiers who were standing by and who were guarding him, say: "He is calling on Elijah!" The soldiers were foreigners, mercenaries on contract to the Romans. They did not understand the language of the Jews. They thought that **Eli** meant Elijah. Hanging on the cross, Jesus feels totally isolated. Even if he wanted to say something to someone, it was not possible. He was completely alone: Judas betrayed him, Peter denied him, the disciples ran away, friends kept themselves apart (v.55), the authorities derided him, the passersby insulted him, God himself abandoned him, and his language was useless for communicating. This is the price he paid for being faithful to his option to follow at all times the way of love and service in order to redeem his brothers and sisters. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for the redemption of many" (Mt 20: 28). In the midst of abandonment and darkness, Jesus lets out a loud cry and dies. He dies letting out the cry of the poor because he knows that God listens to the cry of the poor (Ex 2: 24; 3: 7; 22: 22, 26 etc). With this belief, Jesus enters into death, certain of being heard. The letter to the Hebrews says: "he offered up prayer and entreaty, with loud cries and with tears, to the one who had the power to save him from death, and, winning a hearing by his reverence, he learnt obedience, (Heb 5: 7). God heard his cry and "exalted him" (Phil 2: 9). The resurrection is God's answer to prayer and to the offering Jesus made of his life. With the resurrection of Jesus, the Father proclaims to the whole world this Good News: Those who live like Jesus *serving the brothers and sisters*, are victorious and will live forever, even though they may die and even though they may be killed! This is the Good News of the Kingdom born from the cross!

The Significance of the Death of Jesus:

On Calvary, we are before a tortured human being, one excluded from society, completely isolated, condemned as a heretic and subversive by the civil, military and

religious courts. At the foot of the cross the religious authorities confirm for the last time a failed rebellion, and publicly renounce him (Mt 27: 41-43). And it is at this hour of death that a new significance comes to life again. The identity of Jesus is revealed by a pagan: "In truth this man was son of God!" (Mt 27: 54). From this point on, if you *really* wish to meet the Son of God, do not seek him up above in the far away heavens, nor in the Temple whose veil was torn, but seek him close to you, in the excluded, disfigured, ugly human being. Seek him in those, who like Jesus, give their lives for their brothers and sisters. It is there that God hides himself and reveals himself, and it is there that we can meet Him. There we find the disfigured image of God, of the Son of God. *"Greater love than this there no one has than to give one's life for the brothers and sisters!"*

The Prayer of a Psalm

The psalms that Jesus recites on the Cross:

- Psalm 22 (21): 2: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- Psalm 31 (30): 6: "To your hands I commit my spirit."

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 3, 2023

Holy Week

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

you have called your people to be the servant of one another in the cause of justice and mercy. You showed us in Jesus, your Son, what it means to serve and how much this may cost us. Fill us with the Spirit of Jesus, that we too may not break those who are weak nor repel those groping in the dark.

Let him teach us to serve and to love with compassion for the helpless and respect for the least and the poorest, together with Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 12: 1-11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there; Martha waited on them, and Lazarus was among those at table. Mary brought in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and with it anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair; the house was filled with the scent of the ointment.

Then Judas Iscariot -- one of his disciples, the man who was to betray him--said, 'Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the

poor?' He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he was in charge of the common fund and used to help himself to the contents. So Jesus said, 'Leave her alone; let her keep it for the day of my burial. You have the poor with you always, you will not always have me.'

Meanwhile a large number of Jews heard that he was there and came not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. Then the chief priests decided to kill Lazarus as well, since it was on his account that many of the Jews were leaving them and believing in Jesus.

Reflection

We have entered into Holy Week, the week of the Passover of Jesus, of his passing from this world to the Father (Jn 13: 1). Liturgy today places before us the beginning of chapter 12 of the Gospel of John, which serves as a link between the Book of the Signs (cc 1-11) and the Book of the Glorification (cc 13-21). At the end of the "Book of Signs" there appears, very clearly the tension between Jesus and the religious authority of the time (Jn 10: 19-21, 39) and the danger which Jesus was facing. Several times they had tried to kill him (Jn 10: 31; 11: 8, 53; 12: 10). So much it was like this that Jesus was obliged to lead a clandestine life, because he could be arrested at any moment (Jn 10: 40; 11: 54).

- John 12: 1-2: Jesus persecuted by the Jews, goes to Bethany. Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany to the house of his friends Martha and Mary and of Lazarus. Bethany means, House of Poverty. The police was looking for him (Jn 11: 57). They wanted to kill him (Jn 11: 50). But even now that the police was looking for Jesus, Mary, Martha and Lazarus received him in their house and offered him something to eat. Because love overcomes fear.
- John 12: 3: Mary anoints Jesus. During the meal, Mary anoints the feet of Jesus with a pound of perfume of pure spikenard (cf. Lk 7: 36-50). It was a very costly perfume, so very expensive that it cost three hundred denarii. Then she dried his feet with her hair. The whole house was filled with the scent of the ointment. Mary does not speak during this whole episode. She only acts. The gesture filled with symbolism speaks for itself. In washing the feet, Mary becomes a servant. Jesus will repeat the gesture at the Last Supper (Jn 13: 5).
- John 12: 4-6: Reaction of Judas. Judas criticizes the gesture of Mary. He thinks that it is a waste. In fact, three hundred *denarii* were the wages of three hundred days! The wages of almost a whole year spent in one time alone! Judas thinks that the money should have been given to the poor. The Evangelist comments and says that Judas had no concern at all for the poor, but that he was a thief. They had a common fund and he stole the money. A strong judgment which condemns Judas. It does not condemn the concern for the poor, but the hypocrisy which uses the poor for self promotion and to enrich oneself. Judas, in his own egoistic interests, thought only about money. This is why he was not aware of what Mary kept in her heart. Jesus reads in the heart and defends Mary.
- John 12: 7-8: Jesus defends the woman, Judas thinks only of the waste and criticizes the woman. Jesus thinks of the gesture and defends the woman: "Leave her alone; so that she can keep it for the day of my burial!" And immediately Jesus says: "You have the poor with you always; you will not always have me!" Which of the two lived closer to Jesus: Judas or Mary? Judas, the disciple, lived together with Jesus for almost three years, twenty-four hours a day. He was part of the group. Mary saw him once or twice a year, on the occasion of some feast, when Jesus went to Jerusalem and visited her in her house. But to live together with, not having any love does not help us to know others. Rather it blinds people. Judas was blind. Many

people live together with Jesus and praise him even with many hymns, but do not truly know him and do not reveal him (cf. Mt 7: 21).

Two affirmations of Jesus merit a more detailed comment: (a) "You have the poor with you always" and (b) let her keep it for the day of my burial".

- "You have the poor with you always ". Is it perhaps that Jesus wants to say that we should not be concerned about the poor, given the fact that there will always be poor? Or does he want to say that poverty is the destiny imposed by God? How is this phrase to be understood? At that time, persons knew the Old Testament by heart. It sufficed for Jesus to begin quoting a phrase of the Old Testament and persons already knew the rest. The beginning of the phrase said: "There will never cease to be poor people in the country" (Dt 15: 11^a). The rest of the phrase which people already knew and which Jesus wants to remind is the following: "And this is why I am giving you this command: always be open handed with your brother, and with anyone in your country who is in need and is poor!" (Dt 15: 11b). According to this Law, the community should accept the poor and share its goods with them. But, Judas instead of "opening his hand to help the poor" and to share his goods with them, wanted to do charity with the money of others! He wanted to sell the perfume of Mary for three hundred denarii and use it to help the poor. Jesus quotes the Law of God which taught the contrary. Anyone who, like Judas, carries out a campaign with the money of the sale of the goods of other does not disturb or trouble. But, the one who, like Jesus, insists on the obligation to accept the poor and to share with them one's own goods, this one disturbs, troubles and runs the risk of being condemned.
- John 12: 9-11: The crowds and the authority. To be the friend of Jesus could be dangerous. Lazarus is in danger of death because of the new life received from Jesus. The Jews had decided to kill him. Lazarus alive was a living proof that Jesus was the Messiah. This is why the crowd was looking for him, because people wanted to experience closely the living proof of the power of Jesus. A living community runs the risk of its life because it is the living proof of the Good News of God!

Personal Questions

- Mary was misinterpreted by Judas. Have you been misinterpreted sometimes?
- What does this text of Mary teach us? What does the reaction of Judas say to us?

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)

Tuesday, April 4, 2023

Holy Week

Opening Prayer

Lord our God,

your Son Jesus Christ had to undergo the humiliation of being betrayed and denied by those he called his friends. But he made his suffering and death into instruments of love and reconciliation.

Make us with him people-for-others, who accept difficulties, even betrayals and misunderstanding of our best intentions, and turn them into sources of life and joy for those around us.

Keep us faithful to you and to one another through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 13: 21-33, 36-38

Having said this, Jesus was deeply disturbed and declared, 'In all truth I tell you, one of you is going to betray me.' The disciples looked at each other, wondering whom he meant. The disciple Jesus loved was reclining next to Jesus; Simon Peter signed to him and said, 'Ask who it is he means,' so leaning back close to Jesus' chest he said, 'Who is it, Lord?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give the piece of bread that I dip in the dish.' And when he had dipped the piece of bread he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot. At that instant, after Judas had taken the bread, Satan entered him. Jesus then said, 'What you are going to do, do quickly.'

None of the others at table understood why he said this. Since Judas had charge of the common fund, some of them thought Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival,' or telling him to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the piece of bread he went out. It was night. When he had gone, Jesus said: Now has the Son of man been glorified, and in him God has been glorified. If God has been glorified in him, God will in turn glorify him in himself, and will glorify him very soon. Little children, I shall be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and, as I told the Jews, where I am going, you cannot come.

Simon Peter said, 'Lord, where are you going?' Jesus replied, 'Now you cannot follow me where I am going, but later you shall follow me.' Peter said to him, 'Why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.' 'Lay down your life for me?' answered Jesus. 'In all truth I tell you, before the cock crows you will have disowned me three times.'

Reflection

This is the third day of Holy Week. The texts of the Gospel of these days place before us the terrible facts which will lead to the imprisonment and condemnation of Jesus. The texts not only present the decisions of the religious and civil authority against Jesus, but also the betrayal and the negotiations of the disciples which rendered possible for the authority to arrest Jesus and contributed enormously to increase the suffering of Jesus.

- John 13: 21: The announcement of the betrayal. After having washed the feet of the disciples (Jn 13: 2-11) and having spoken about the obligation that we have of washing each other's feet (Jn 13: 12-16), Jesus is profoundly touched. And it is no wonder. He was fulfilling that gesture of service and total gift of self, while at his side one of the disciples was planning how to betray him that same night. Jesus expresses his emotion saying: "In all truth I tell you one of you is going to betray me!" He does not say: "Judas will betray me," but "one of you." It is one of his group who will betray him.
- John 13: 22-25: The reaction of the disciples. The disciples are frightened. They did not expect that declaration, that is, that one of them would be the traitor. Peter makes a sign to John to ask Jesus which of the twelve would be the traitor. This is a

sign that they did not know one another well, they could not succeed in understanding who could be the traitor. A sign, that is, that the friendship among them had not as yet reached the same transparency that Jesus had with them (cf. Jn 15: 15). John reclined near Jesus and asked him: "Who is it?"

- John 13: 26-30: Jesus indicates Judas. Jesus says: It is the one to whom I give the piece of bread that I dip in the dish. He took a piece of bread, dips it in the cup and hands it over to Judas. This was a common and normal gesture which the participants at a supper used to do among themselves. And Jesus tells Judas: "What you are going to do, do quickly!" Judas had charge of the common fund. He was in charge of buying things and of giving the alms to the poor. This is why no one perceived anything special in the gesture and in the words of Jesus. In this description of the announcement of the betrayal is evoked the Psalm in which the psalmist complains about the friend who betrays him: "Even my trusted friend on whom I relied, who shared my table takes advantage of me" (Ps 41: 10; cf. Ps 55: 13-15). Judas becomes aware that Jesus knew everything (cf. Jn 13: 18). But even knowing it, he does not change his mind but keeps the decision to betray Jesus. This is the moment in which the separation between Judas and Jesus takes place. John says at this moment Satan entered him. Judas rises and leaves. He places himself at the side of the enemy (Satan). John comments: "'It was night'. It was dark.
- John 13: 31-33: The glorification of Jesus begins. It is as if history had waited for this moment of separation between light and darkness. Satan (the enemy) and darkness entered into Judas when he decides to carry out what he was planning. In that moment the light was made in Jesus who declares: "Now the son of man has been glorified, and in him God has been glorified also. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will in turn glorify him in himself, and will glorify him very soon!" Everything which will happen from now on will be in the regressive way. The decisions had already been taken by Jesus (Jn 12: 27-28) and now by Judas. The facts follow one another hastily. And, Jesus announces it: "Little children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and, as I told the Jews, where I am going you cannot come". There is little time left before the Passover.
- John 13: 34-35: The new commandment. Today's Gospel omits these two verses on the new commandment of love and begins to speak about the announcement of the denial of Peter.
- John 13: 36-38: Announcement of the denial of Peter. Together with the betrayal of Judas, the Gospel also speaks of the denial of Peter. These are the two facts which contribute the most to Jesus suffering and pain. Peter says that he is ready to give his life for Jesus. Jesus recalls and reminds him of reality: "You are ready to lay down your life for me? In all truth I tell you, before the cock crows you will have disowned me three times". Mark had written: "Before the cock crows twice, you will have disowned me three times" (Mk 14: 30). Everybody knows that the cock crows rapidly. When in the morning the first cock begins to sing, almost at the same time all the cocks crow together. Peter is more rapid in his denial than the cock in crowing.

Personal Questions

- Judas, the friend, becomes the traitor. Peter, the friend, denies Jesus. And I?
- I place myself in Jesus' situation and I think: how does he face the denial and the betrayal, the contempt and the exclusion?

Concluding Prayer

You are my hope, Lord,
my trust, Yahweh, since boyhood. On you I have relied since my birth,
since my mother's womb you have been my portion, the constant theme of my praise.
(Ps 71: 5-6)

Wednesday, April 5, 2023

Holy Week

Opening Prayer

God our Father,
when the hour of your Son Jesus had come to accept suffering and death out of love of you and his saving love for us, he did not refuse that suffering and deep pain.
In the hour of trial that we may have to pass through, do not let us become rebellious but keep us trusting in you, for you save us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 26: 14-25

One of the Twelve, the man called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What are you prepared to give me if I hand him over to you?' They paid him thirty silver pieces, and from then onwards he began to look for an opportunity to betray him. Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus to say, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' He said, 'Go to a certain man in the city and say to him, "The Master says: My time is near. It is at your house that I am keeping Passover with my disciples."' The disciples did what Jesus told them and prepared the Passover.

When evening came he was at table with the Twelve. And while they were eating he said, 'In truth I tell you, one of you is about to betray me.' They were greatly distressed and started asking him in turn, 'Not me, Lord, surely?' He answered, 'Someone who has dipped his hand into the dish with me will betray me. The Son of man is going to his fate, as the scriptures say he will, but alas for that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! Better for that man if he had never been born!' Judas, who was to betray him, asked in his turn, 'Not me, Rabbi, surely?' Jesus answered, 'It is you who say it.'

Reflection

Yesterday the Gospel spoke of the betrayal of Judas and of the denial of Peter. Today, it speaks once again of the betrayal of Judas. In the description of the Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, the failure of the disciples is strongly stressed. In spite of having lived three years together with Jesus, not one of them defends Jesus. Judas betrays him, Peter denies him, and the others flee. Matthew narrates everything, not to criticize or to condemn, neither to discourage the readers, but in order to underline that acceptance and the love of Jesus exceed the defeat and the failure of the disciples! This way of describing the attitude of Jesus was a help for the Communities at the time of Matthew. Because of the frequent persecutions, many were discouraged and had

abandoned the community and asked themselves: "Will it be possible to return? Will God accept and forgive us?" Matthew responds by suggesting that we can break the relationship with Jesus, but Jesus never breaks it with us. His love is greater than our infidelity. This is a very important message which we get from the Gospel during Holy Week.

- Matthew 26: 14-16: The Decision of Judas to betray Jesus. Judas took the decision after Jesus did not accept the criticism of the disciples concerning the woman who wastes a very expensive perfume only to anoint Jesus (Mt 26: 6-13). He went to the chief priest and asked: "What are you prepared to give me if I hand him over to you?" They agreed on the sum of thirty silver pieces. Matthew recalls the words of the Prophet Zechariah to describe the price agreed upon (Zc 11: 12). At the same time, the betrayal of Jesus for thirty silver coins recalls the sale of Joseph by his brothers, decided by the buyers for twenty coins (Gn 37: 28). It also reminds the price of thirty coins to be paid for the wounding of a slave (Ex 21: 32).
- Matthew 26: 17-19: The preparation for the Passover. Jesus was coming from Galilee. He did not have a house in Jerusalem. He spent the night in the Garden of Olives (cf. Jn 8: 1). In the days of the feast of the Passover the people of Jerusalem increased three times in number because of the enormous number of pilgrims who went there from all parts. For Jesus it was not easy to find a big room where to celebrate the Passover together with the pilgrims coming from Galilee, as himself. He ordered his disciples to find a person in whose house he had decided to celebrate the Passover. The Gospel does not offer any other information and allows the imagination to complete what is missing in the information. Was this a person known by Jesus? A relative? A disciple? Throughout the centuries the imagination of the Apocrypha has known how to complete this information, but with little credibility.
- Matthew 26: 20-25: The announcement of the betrayal of Judas. Jesus knew that he will be betrayed. Although Judas did things secretly. Jesus knew. But in spite of that, he wants to act fraternally with the group of friends to which Judas belongs. When all were together for the last time, Jesus announces who is the traitor "Someone who has dipped his hand into the dish with me will betray me". This way of announcing the betrayal renders even clearer the contrast. For the Jews, the communion around the table, to dip the hand together in the same dish, was the maximum expression of intimacy and trust. In this way, Matthew suggests that in spite of the betrayal made by someone who was a friend, the love of Jesus is greater than the betrayal!
- What strikes in the way in which Matthew describes these facts? Between the denial and the betrayal there is the institution of the Eucharist (Mt 26: 26-29): the betrayal of Judas first (Mt 26: 20-25); the denial of Peter and the flight of the disciples, afterwards (Mt 25: 30-35). Thus, he stressed for us the incredible gratuitousness of the love of Jesus, which exceeds the betrayal, the denial and the flight of the friends. His love does not depend on what others do for him.

Personal Questions

- Am I capable of being like Judas and to deny and betray God, Jesus, the friends?
- In Holy Week it is important to reserve some moments to become aware of the unbelievable gratuity of God's love for me.

Concluding Prayer

Sing to God, play music to his name, build a road for the Rider of the Clouds, rejoice in Yahweh, dance before him.

Father of orphans, defender of widows, such is God in his holy dwelling. (Ps 68,4-5)

Thursday, April 6, 2023

Holy Thursday of the Lord's Supper

LECTIO

Initial Prayer

"When you speak, Lord, the nothingness beats in life: the dry bones become living persons, the desert flourishes... When I get ready to pray, I feel dry, I do not know what to say. Evidently, I am not in harmony with your will, my lips are not in tune with my heart, my heart does not make an effort to get in tune with yours. Renew my heart, purify my lips so that I can speak with you as you want me to do it, so that I can speak with others as you wish, so that I can speak with myself, with my interior world, as you wish". (L. Renna).

The Reading of the Gospel - John 13: 1-15

1 Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were his in the world, loved them to the end. 2 They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray him. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that he had come from God and was returning to God, 4 and he got up from table, removed his outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round his waist; 5 he then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he was wearing. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' 7 Jesus answered, 'At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 8 'Never!' said Peter. 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus replied, 'If I do not wash you, you can have no share with me.' Simon Peter said, 9 'Well then, Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well!' 10 Jesus said, 'No one who has had a bath needs washing, such a person is clean all over. You too are clean, though not all of you are.' 11 He knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said, 'though not all of you are'. 12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments again he went back to the table. 'Do you understand', he said, 'what I have done to you?' 13 You call me Master and Lord, and rightly; so I am. 14 If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. 15 I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you.

Moments of Prayerful Silence

In a loving listening, words are not necessary, because silence also speaks and communicates love.

MEDITATIO

Preamble to the Passover of Jesus

The passage of the Gospel of today is inserted in a literary whole which includes chapters 13-17. At the beginning we have the account of the Last Supper which Jesus shares with his disciples, during which he fulfils the gesture of the washing of the feet (13: 1-30). Then Jesus interweaves a long dialogue of farewell with his disciples (13: 31-14, 31). Chapters 15-17 have the function to deepen further the previous discourse of the Master. Immediately, after this, Jesus is arrested (18: 1-11). In any case, these events narrated in 13: 17, 26 are joined already in 13: 1 with the Passover of Jesus. It is interesting to note this last annotation: from 12: 1 the Passover is no longer called the Passover of the Jews, but of Jesus. From now on, it is He, the Lamb of God who will liberate man from sin. The Passover of Jesus is one that aims to liberate man: a new exodus which permits to go from darkness to light (8: 12), and which will bear life and feast in humanity (7: 37).

Jesus is aware that he is about to conclude his journey toward the Father and, therefore he is about to bring to an end his personal and definitive exodus. Such a passage, going to the Father, takes place through the Cross, the central moment in which Jesus will surrender his life for the good of man.

It strikes the reader when he becomes aware how the Evangelist John knows how to present the person of Jesus well, while he is aware of the last events of his life and therefore, of his mission. So as to affirm that Jesus is not crushed or overcome by the events which threaten his life, but that he is ready to give his life. Before, the Evangelist has remarked that his hour had not arrived; but now in the account of the washing of the feet he says that he is aware that his hour is close at hand. Such a conscience is at the basis of the expression of John: "After having loved those who were his in the world, he loved them to the end" (v. 1). Love for "his own", for those who form the new community, has been evident while he was with them, but it will shine in an eminent way in his death. Jesus shows such a love in the gesture of the washing of the feet, which in its symbolical value, shows the continuous love which is expressed in service.

The Washing of the Feet

Jesus is at an ordinary supper with his disciples. He is fully conscious of the mission which the Father has entrusted to him: the salvation of humanity depends on him. With such an awareness he wishes to show "to his own," through the washing of the feet, how the work of salvation of the Father is fulfilled and to indicate in such a gesture the surrender of his life for the salvation of man. It is the will of Jesus that man be saved, and a longing desire leads him to give up his life and to surrender. He is aware that the Father gives Jesus complete freedom of action.

Besides, Jesus knows that his true provenance and the goal of his itinerary is God; he knows that his death on the Cross, the maximum expression of his love, is the last moment of his journey of salvation. His death is an "exodus"; it is the climax of his victory over death, in his surrender (giving his life) Jesus reveals to us the presence of God as the fullness of life and exemption from death.

With this full consciousness of his identity and of his complete liberty Jesus is prepared to fulfil the great and humble gesture of the washing of the feet. Such a gesture of love is described with a great number of verbs (eight) which render the scene absorbing, enthralling and full of significance. The Evangelist in presenting the last action of Jesus toward his own, uses this rhetorical figure of the accumulation of verbs without repeating himself in order that such a gesture remains impressed in the heart and mind of his disciples and of every reader and in order that a commandment may always be remembered, not forgotten. The gesture fulfilled by Jesus intends to show that true love is expressed in tangible actions of service. Jesus despoils himself of his garments and ties around his waist a towel or apron, symbol of service. More precisely,

Jesus takes off his garments is an expression which expresses the significance of the gift of life. Which is the teaching which Jesus transmits to his disciples through this gesture? He shows them that love is expressed in service, in giving one's life for others as he has done.

At the time of Jesus the washing of the feet was a gesture which expressed hospitality and welcome towards the guests. In an ordinary way it was done by a slave or also by the wife, concerning the wife and also the daughters toward their father. Besides, it was the custom that such a rite of the washing of the feet should be done before they sat at table and not during the meal. Such an insertion of Jesus' action intends to stress or underline how singular or significant his gesture was.

And thus, Jesus gets down to wash the feet of his disciples. The repeated use of the apron which Jesus tied around his waist underlines the attitude of service which is a permanent attribute of the person of Jesus. In fact, when he will have finished the washing of the feet, Jesus does not take off the towel which he used as an apron. Such a detail intends to underline that the service-love does not end with his death. This minute detail shows the intention of the Evangelist to wish to underline the significance and importance of the gesture of Jesus. By washing the feet of his disciples Jesus intends to show them his love, which is one with that of the Father (10: 30, 38). This image with which Jesus reveals God is really shocking: he is not a Sovereign who resides exclusively in Heaven, but he presents himself as the servant of humanity in order to raise it to the divine level. From this divine service flows, for the community of believers, that liberty which comes from the love which renders all its members as "lords" (free) because they are servants. It is like saying that only liberty creates the true love. From now on, service which the believers will render to man will have as its purpose that of restoring the relationship among men in whom equality and liberty are a consequence of the practice of reciprocal service. Jesus, with his gesture intends to show that any domination or tentative to prevail over man is contrary to the attitude of God who, instead, serves man to raise him to himself. Besides, the pretensions of superiority of one man over another, no longer have any sense, because the community founded by Jesus does not have any pyramidal characteristics, but horizontal dimensions, in which each one is at the service of others, following the example of God and of Jesus.

In synthesis, the gesture which Jesus fulfilled expresses the following values: the love toward the brothers demands to be expressed in fraternal acceptance, hospitality, that is, in permanent service.

Peter's Resistance

The reaction of Peter before the gesture of Jesus is expressed in attitudes of surprise and protest. There is also a change in the way in which he related to Jesus: Peter calls him "Lord" (13: 6). In such a title Jesus is recognized as having a level of superiority which is in conflict with the "washing" of the feet, an action which belongs, instead, to an inferior subject. The protest is expressed energetically by the words: "Are you going to wash my feet?" In Peter's eyes this humiliating gesture of the washing of the feet seemed to him as an inversion of values which regulate the relationship between Jesus and men: the first one is the Master, Peter is a subject. Peter disapproves the equality which Jesus wants to create among men.

To such misunderstanding Jesus responds inviting Peter to accept the sense of washing his feet as a witness of his love toward him. More precisely, he wants to offer him a concrete proof of how he and the Father love him.

But Peter in his reaction does not give in: he categorically refuses that Jesus should get down at his feet. According to Peter each one should carry out his own role, it is not possible to have a community or a society based on equality. It is not acceptable that

Jesus abandons his position of superiority to render himself equal to his disciples. Such an idea of the Master disorients Peter and leads him to protest. Not accepting the service of love of his Master, he neither accepts that he dies on the cross for him (12: 34; 13: 37). It is as to say that Peter is far away from understanding what is true love, and such an obstacle is an impediment so that Jesus can show it to him by his action.

In the meantime, if Peter is not ready to share the dynamics of love which manifests itself in reciprocal service, he cannot share the friendship with Jesus and runs the risk, truly, to exclude himself.

Following the admonition of Jesus "If I do not wash you, you can have no share with me" (v. 8), Peter adheres to the threatening words of the Master, but without accepting the profound sense of the action of Jesus. He shows himself open, ready to let Jesus wash his feet, not only the feet, but also his hands and head. It seems that it is easier for Peter to accept Jesus' gesture as an action of purification or ablution rather than as a service. But Jesus responds that the disciples have become pure ("clean") at the moment when they accepted to allow themselves to be guided by the Word of the Master, rejecting that of the world. Peter and the disciples no longer need the Jewish rite of the purification but to allow themselves to have their feet washed by Jesus; or rather to allow themselves to be loved by him, conferring them dignity and liberty.

The Memorial of Love

At the end of the washing of the feet Jesus intends to give his action a permanent validity for his community and at the same time to leave to it a memorial or commandment which should always regulate the fraternal relationships.

Jesus is the Lord, not in the dimension of domination, but in so far as he communicates the love of the Father (his Spirit) which makes us children of God and qualified to imitate Jesus who freely gives his love to his own. Jesus intended to communicate such an interior attitude to his own, a love which does not exclude anyone, not even Judas who is about to betray him. Therefore, if the disciples call him Lord, they have to imitate him; if they consider him Master, they have to listen to him.

Some Question to Meditate On

- He got up from the table: How do you live the Eucharist? In a sedentary way or do you allow yourself to be moved to action by the fire of the love which you receive? Do you run the risk that the Eucharist in which you participate is lost in contemplative Narcissism, without leading to the commitment of solidarity and sharing? Your commitment in favor of justice, of the poor, does it come from the habit of encountering Christ in the Eucharist, from the familiarity with him?
- He removed his outer garments: when from the Eucharist you go to daily life, do you know how to remove the garments of your own benefit, your calculations, personal interests to allow yourself to be guided by an authentic love toward others?
- Or rather, after the Eucharist you are not capable of removing your garments of domination and of arrogance to put on those of simplicity, of poverty?
- Taking a towel he wrapped it around his waist: this is the image of the "Church of the apron". In the life of your family, of your ecclesial community, do you walk on the street of service, of sharing? Are you directly involved in the service to the poor and to the least? Do you know how to see the face of Christ who asks to be served, loved in the poor?

ORATIO

Psalm 116 (114-115): 12-13; 15-16; 17-18

The Psalmist who finds himself in the time and in the presence of the liturgical assembly sings his sacrifice of thanksgiving. Voltaire who had a special predilection for v. 12 expressed himself as follows: "What can I offer to the Lord for all the gifts which he has given me?"

What return can I make to Yahweh for his generosity to me?

I shall take up the cup of salvation and call on the name of Yahweh.

Costly in Yahweh's sight is the death of his faithful. I beg you, Yahweh!

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.

I shall fulfil my vows to Yahweh, witnessed by all his people

Final Prayer

Fascinated with the way in which God expressed his love toward his own, Origin prayed as follows:

Jesus, come, my feet are dirty.

Become a servant for me, pour the water in the basin; come, wash my feet.

I know it, what I am saying is daring, but I fear the threat of your words:

"If I do not wash you, you can have no share with me". Wash then my feet, so that I may have a share with you. (*Homily 5 on Isaiah*)

And Saint Ambrose having an ardent desire to correspond to the love of Jesus, expresses himself as follows:

Oh, my Lord Jesus,

allow me to wash your sacred feet; you got them dirty when you walked in my soul... But where will I take the water from the fountain to wash your feet?

In lacking that I only have the eyes to weep: bathing your feet with my tears, do in such a way that I myself remain purified. (*Treatise on penance*).

Friday, April 7, 2023

The Passion of Our Lord

Recollection in Prayer – *Statio*

Come, you who refresh us, the soul's delightful guest,

come take away all that is mine, and pour into me all that is yours. Come, you who are the nourishment of every chaste thought, source of all mercies, sum of all purity. Come and burn away all that in me is cause of my not being able to be consumed by you.

Come, Spirit, who are ever with the Father and the Bridegroom, and rest over the brides of the Bridegroom. (St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, O. Carm., in *La Probatione* ii, 193-194.)

A Prayerful Reading of the Word – *Lectio*

Gospel Reading – John 18: 1- 19: 42

1 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. 2 Judas the traitor knew the place also, since Jesus had often met his disciples there, 3 so Judas brought the cohort to this place together with guards sent by the chief priests and the Pharisees, all with lanterns and torches and weapons. 4 Knowing everything that was to happen to him, Jesus came forward and said, 'Who are you looking for?' 5 They answered, 'Jesus the Nazarene.' He said, 'I am he.' Now Judas the traitor was standing among them. 6 When Jesus said to them, 'I am he,' they moved back and fell on the ground. 7 He asked them a second time, 'Who are you looking for?' They said, 'Jesus the Nazarene.'

8 Jesus replied, 'I have told you that I am he. If I am the one you are looking for, let these others go.' 9 This was to fulfil the words he had spoken, 'Not one of those you gave me have I lost.' 10 Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest's servant, cutting off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus. 11 Jesus said to Peter, 'Put your sword back in its scabbard; am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?'

12 The cohort and its tribune and the Jewish guards seized Jesus and bound him. 13 They took him first to Annas, because Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. 14 It was Caiaphas who had counselled the Jews, 'It is better for one man to die for the people.'

15 Simon Peter, with another disciple, followed Jesus. This disciple, who was known to the high priest, went with Jesus into the high priest's palace, 16 but Peter stayed outside the door. So the other disciple, the one known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the door-keeper and brought Peter in. 17 The girl on duty at the door said to Peter, 'Aren't you another of that man's disciples?' He answered, 'I am not.' 18 Now it was cold, and the servants and guards had lit a charcoal fire and were standing there warming themselves; so Peter stood there too, warming himself with the others.

19 The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. 20 Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly for all the world to hear; I have always taught in the synagogue and in the Temple where all the Jews meet together; I have said nothing in secret. 21 Why ask me? Ask my hearers what I taught; they know what I said.' 22 At these words, one of the guards standing by gave Jesus a slap in the face, saying, 'Is that the way you answer the high priest?' 23 Jesus replied, 'If there is some offence in what I said, point it out; but if not, why do you strike me?' 24 Then Annas sent him, bound, to Caiaphas the high priest.

25 As Simon Peter stood there warming himself, someone said to him, 'Aren't you another of his disciples?' He denied it saying, 'I am not.' 26 One of the high priest's servants, a relation of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, said, 'Didn't I see you in the garden with him?' 27 Again Peter denied it; and at once a cock crowed.

28 They then led Jesus from the house of Caiaphas to the Praetorium. It was now morning. They did not go into the Praetorium themselves to avoid becoming defiled and unable to eat the Passover. 29 So Pilate came outside to them and said, 'What charge do you bring against this man?' They replied, 30 'If he were not a criminal, we should not have handed him over to you.' 31 Pilate said, 'Take him yourselves, and try him by

your own Law.' The Jews answered, 'We are not allowed to put anyone to death.' 32 This was to fulfil the words Jesus had spoken indicating the way he was going to die. 33 So Pilate went back into the Praetorium and called Jesus to him and asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' 34 Jesus replied, 'Do you ask this of your own accord, or have others said it to you about me?' 35 Pilate answered, 'Am I a Jew? It is your own people and the chief priests who have handed you over to me: what have you done?' 36 Jesus replied, 'Mine is not a kingdom of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews. As it is, my kingdom does not belong here.' 37 Pilate said, 'So, then you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'It is you who say that I am a king. I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.' 38 'Truth?' said Pilate. 'What is that?' And so saying he went out again to the Jews and said, 'I find no case against him. 39 But according to a custom of yours I should release one prisoner at the Passover; would you like me, then, to release for you the king of the Jews?' 40 At this they shouted, 'Not this man,' they said, 'but Barabbas.' Barabbas was a bandit.

19:1 Pilate then had Jesus taken away and scourged; 2 and after this, the soldiers twisted some thorns into a crown and put it on his head and dressed him in a purple robe. 3 They kept coming up to him and saying, 'Hail, king of the Jews!' and slapping him in the face. 4 Pilate came outside again and said to them, 'Look, I am going to bring him out to you to let you see that I find no case against him.' 5 Jesus then came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said, 'Here is the man.' 6 When they saw him, the chief priests and the guards shouted, 'Crucify him! Crucify him!' Pilate said, 'Take him yourselves and crucify him: I find no case against him.' 7 The Jews replied, 'We have a Law, and according to that Law he ought to be put to death, because he has claimed to be Son of God.'

8 When Pilate heard them say this his fears increased. 9 Re-entering the Praetorium, he said to Jesus, 'Where do you come from?' But Jesus made no answer. 10 Pilate then said to him, 'Are you refusing to speak to me? Surely you know I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?' 11 Jesus replied, 'You would have no power over me at all if it had not been given you from above; that is why the man who handed me over to you has the greater guilt.'

12 From that moment Pilate was anxious to set him free, but the Jews shouted, 'If you set him free you are no friend of Caesar's; anyone who makes himself king is defying Caesar.' 13 Hearing these words, Pilate had Jesus brought out, and seated him on the chair of judgement at a place called the Pavement, in Hebrew Gabbatha. 14 It was the Day of Preparation, about the sixth hour. 'Here is your king,' said Pilate to the Jews. 15 But they shouted, 'Away with him, away with him, crucify him.' Pilate said, 'Shall I crucify your king?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king except Caesar.' 16 So at that Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified. They then took charge of Jesus, 17 and carrying his own cross he went out to the Place of the Skull or, as it is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, 18 where they crucified him with two others, one on either side, Jesus being in the middle. 19 Pilate wrote out a notice and had it fixed to the cross; it ran: 'Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews'. 20 This notice was read by many of the Jews, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the writing was in Hebrew, Latin and Greek. 21 So the Jewish chief priests said to Pilate, 'You should not write "King of the Jews", but that the man said, "I am King of the Jews". '

22 Pilate answered, 'What I have written, I have written.'

23 When the soldiers had finished crucifying Jesus they took his clothing and divided it into four shares, one for each soldier. His undergarment was seamless, woven in one piece from neck to hem; 24 so they said to one another, 'Instead of tearing it, let's throw

dice to decide who is to have it.' In this way the words of scripture were fulfilled: They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothes. That is what the soldiers did.

25 Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. 26 Seeing his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, this is your son.' 27 Then to the disciple he said, 'This is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his home.

28 After this, Jesus knew that everything had now been completed and, so that the scripture should be completely fulfilled, he said: I am thirsty. 29 A jar full of sour wine stood there; so, putting a sponge soaked in the wine on a hyssop stick, they held it up to his mouth. 30 After Jesus had taken the wine he said, 'It is fulfilled'; and bowing his head he gave up his spirit.

31 It was the Day of Preparation, and to avoid the bodies' remaining on the cross during the Sabbath -- since that Sabbath was a day of special solemnity -- the Jews asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken away. 32 Consequently the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with him and then of the other. 33 When they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead, and so instead of breaking his legs 34 one of the soldiers pierced his side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water.

35 This is the evidence of one who saw it -- true evidence, and he knows that what he says is true -- and he gives it so that you may believe as well. 36 Because all this happened to fulfil the words of scripture: Not one bone of his will be broken; 37 and again, in another place scripture says: They will look to the one whom they have pierced.

38 After this, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus -- though a secret one because he was afraid of the Jews -- asked Pilate to let him remove the body of Jesus. Pilate gave permission, so they came and took it away. 39 Nicodemus came as well -- the same one who had first come to Jesus at night-time -- and he brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, following the Jewish burial custom. 41 At the place where he had been crucified there was a garden, and in this garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been buried. 42 Since it was the Jewish Day of Preparation and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

Reflecting on the Word – *Meditatio*

A Key to the Reading:

- **Jesus Master of His Fate**

I would like to suggest that we meditate in the spirit of Mary, at the foot of the cross of Jesus. She, the strong woman who understood the full meaning of this event of the passion and death of the Lord, will help us cast a contemplative glance at the crucified (Jn 19: 25–27). We are looking at chapter 19 of John's Gospel, which begins with the scene of the scourging and the crowning with thorns. Pilate presents "Jesus the Nazarene, the king of the Jews" to the chief priests and to the guards who call for his death on the cross (Jn 19, 6). Thus begins for Jesus the way of the cross towards Golgotha, where he will be crucified. In the story of the Passion according to John, Jesus reveals himself as master of himself and in control of all that is happening to him. John's text is full of phrases that point to this theological fact, that Jesus offers his life. He actively, not passively, endures the events of the

passion. Here are just some examples putting the stress on some phrases and words. The reader may find other examples: Knowing everything that was to happen to him, Jesus came forward and said: "Who are you looking for?" They answered, "Jesus the Nazarene". He said, "I am he!". Now Judas the traitor was standing among them. When Jesus said to them "I am he", they moved back and fell on the ground. He asked them a second time, "Who are you looking for?" They said, "Jesus the Nazarene". Jesus replied, "I have told you that I am he. If I am the one you are looking for, let these others go". This was to fulfil the words he had spoken, "Not one of those you gave me have I lost". (Jn 18: 4-9) "Jesus then came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe" (Jn 19: 5), Jesus replied, "You would have no power over me at all, if it had not been given you from above." (Jn 19: 11).

On the cross too, Jesus takes an active part in his death, he does not allow himself to be killed like the thieves whose legs were broken (Jn 19: 31-33), but commits his spirit (Jn 19: 30). The details recalled by the Evangelist are very important: Seeing his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, this is your son.' Then to the disciple he said, 'This is your mother.' (Jn 19: 26-27). These simple words of Jesus bear the weight of revelation, words that reveal to us his will: "this is your son" (v. 26); "this is your mother" (v. 27). These words also recall those pronounced by Pilate on the Lithostrotos: "This is the man" (Jn 19: 5). With these words, Jesus on the cross, his throne, reveals his will and his love for us. He is the lamb of God, the shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. At that moment, by the cross, he gives birth to the Church, represented by Mary, his sister Mary of Cleophas and Mary Magdalene together with the beloved disciple (Jn 19: 25).

- **Beloved and Faithful Disciples**

The fourth Gospel specifies that these disciples "stood by the cross" (Jn 19: 25-26). This detail has a deep meaning. Only the fourth Gospel tells us that these five persons stood by the cross. The other Evangelists do not say so. Luke, for instance, says that all those who knew him followed the events from a distance (Lk 23: 49). Matthew also says that many women followed these events from afar. These women had followed Jesus from Galilee and served him. But now they followed him from afar (Mt 27: 55- 56). Like Matthew, Mark gives us the names of those who followed the death of Jesus from afar (Mk 15: 40-41). Thus, only the fourth Gospel says that the mother of Jesus and the other women and the beloved disciple "stood by the cross". They stood there like servants before their king. They are present courageously at a time when Jesus has already declared that "it is fulfilled" (Jn 19: 30). The mother of Jesus is present at the hour that finally "has come". That hour foretold at the wedding feast of Cana (Jn 2: 1ff). The fourth Gospel had remarked then that "the mother of Jesus was there" (Jn 2: 1). Thus, the person that remains faithful to the Lord in his destiny, he/she is a beloved disciple. The Evangelist keeps this disciple anonymous so that each one of us may see him/herself mirrored in the one who knew the mysteries of the Lord, who laid his head on Jesus' chest at the last supper (Jn 13: 25).

Questions and Suggestions to Direct our Meditation and Practice

- Read once more the passage of the Gospel and look in the Bible for the texts mentioned in the key to the reading. Look for other parallel texts that may help us penetrate deeper into the text presented for our meditation.

- In spirit, and with the help of the prayerful reading of John's text, visit the places of the Passion, stop on Calvary to witness with Mary and the beloved disciple the events of the Passion.
- What struck you most?
- What feelings does this story of the Passion arouse in you?
- What does the fact that Jesus actively bears his passion mean for you?

Oratio

O Eternal Wisdom, Infinite Goodness, Ineffable Truth, You who probe hearts, Eternal God, help us to understand that you can, know and want to! O Loving and Bleeding Lamb, crucified Christ, fulfil in us that which you said: "Anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark, but will have the light of life" (Jn 8: 12). O perfect light, from whom all lights proceed! O light for whom light was created, without whom all is darkness and with whom all is light. Light up, light up, do light up! Let your whole will penetrate all the authors and collaborators you have chosen in this work of renewal. Jesus, Jesus love, Jesus, transform us and make us conform to you. Uncreated Wisdom, Eternal Word, sweet Truth, silent Love, Jesus, Jesus Love! (St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, O. Carm., in *The Renewal of the Church*, 90-91.)

Contemplatio

Repeat frequently and calmly these words of Jesus when he offered himself: "Father into your hands I commend my spirit"

Sunday, April 9, 2023

Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of the Lord

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 20: 1-9

A Key to Guide the Reading:

Let us read the text where the evangelist seeks to tell the readers the meaning of faith in the resurrection. He seeks to do this by means of the visit of the two disciples to the

empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. While reading, let us pay attention to the details of the story as told in the Gospel of John who presents a very deep symbolic dimension.

A Division of the Text to Assist a Careful Reading:

- Jn 20: 1-3: the disturbing experience of the empty tomb
- Jn 20: 4-10: Peter and the beloved disciple run to the sepulchre: the beloved disciple saw and believed
- Jn 20: 11-18: Jesus shows himself first to Mary Magdalene and gives her a command.

The Text:

1-3: It was very early on the first day of the week and still dark, when Mary of Magdala came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been moved away from the tomb and came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,' she said, 'and we don't know where they have put him.' So Peter set out with the other disciple to go to the tomb.

4-10: They ran together, but the other disciple, running faster than Peter, reached the tomb first; he bent down and saw the linen cloths lying on the ground, but did not go in. Simon Peter, following him, also came up, went into the tomb, saw the linen cloths lying on the ground and also the cloth that had been over his head; this was not with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in; he saw and he believed. Till this moment they had still not understood the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. The disciples then went back home.

11-18: But 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.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may enter into us and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What struck you in this text that describes the first experience of the resurrection?

- The beloved disciple went in, saw and believed. What did he see and what led him to believe? Why is it that the text tells us only the reaction of the beloved disciple and not that of Peter?
- What changes take place in Mary Magdalene during the dialogue? How did this change happen?
- What mission or command does Jesus give Mary Magdalene?
- Mary Magdalene was seeking Jesus in one way and meets him in another. How does this occur in our lives?
- To see and believe. The beloved disciple saw and believed. What is it that leads me to believe that Jesus is alive, that he is present in our midst, today, giving new life to the poor?
- Have you gone through an experience of loss or death? What gave you new life or new hope and the joy of life? What is it that I say when I affirm, "I believe in the resurrection"?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper into the text.

In John's Gospel, faith in the resurrection is encountered in the description of the passion and death of Jesus:

- In describing the passion and death of Jesus, John's Gospel wants to point out not the sentence passed on a political subversive, but the hour for glorifying the Son of God. During the whole process that carries Jesus to his death, he is master of what happens to himself and to his adversaries. For John, the cross is synonymous with "lifting", rising on high, to be with the Father (Jn 3: 14; 8: 28; 12: 32-34). It is the beginning of the resurrection that is revealed fully on the first day of the week (Jn 20: 1). That is why in John's Gospel there is no agony in the garden (Jn 18: 1-2). When Jesus is in prison, the soldiers are frightened when Jesus says: "I am he!" (Jn 18: 6). When Jesus is dying, he does not cry out like in the other Gospels. Serenely he takes leave of his friends, of his mother, and then expires (Jn 19: 28-30).
- The story of the passion is another more concrete example of the fact that John does not simply relate historical facts but puts them through an X-Ray. He tries to show that which the facts hide. When Pilate, Hanna, the Jewish and Roman authorities try to end Jesus' life, in truth they were allowing Jesus to be elevated towards God. From his prison, Jesus directs events and gives his life. "I lay down my life of my own free will, and as it is in my power to lay it down, so it is in my power to take it up again. No one takes it from me, I lay it down of my own free will" (Jn 10: 17-18). All can set their minds at rest and be full of hope because Jesus has overcome and has been glorified by the Father (Jn 17: 5).

Peter and the beloved disciple go the empty tomb (vv. 1-10):

- The experience of the resurrection of the early community was a long process, an experience that grew slowly like the growth of a strong tree. At first, many did not believe in the witness of those who had experienced the living presence of Jesus (Mt 28: 17; Mk 16: 11, 13, 14; Lk 24: 11, 36, 41; Jn 20: 25). But the experience of the resurrection expressed in the form of apparitions was so strong, so deep and so

convincing that it succeeded in overcoming human unbelief confronted with the possibility of the victory of life over death.

- The women were more faithful than the men. They were the first to believe in the Good News of the resurrection (Mt 28: 9-10; Lk 24: 4-11; Jn 20: 11-18). Confronted by the news of Mary Magdalene who sees the empty tomb, Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb. The Gospel relates the strange news according to which "the other disciple" ran faster than Peter and arrived first at the tomb, but did not go in. He looked inside and saw the bandages on the ground. After he went in he saw also the folded shroud to one side. The Gospel then says, "He saw and believed!" But nothing is said of Peter's reaction although it was he who had gone first into the empty tomb. At the end, the Gospel adds, "Till this moment they had failed to understand the teaching of scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (Jn 20: 9). This means that the Old Testament on its own does not communicate a complete understanding of that which it contains. The light for understanding the real meaning of the Old Testament appears at the very moment when the beloved disciple "saw and believed". His experience of the resurrection was like a light that struck the eyes of the disciples and revealed to them the complete and full meaning of the Old Testament. It is this light to the sight that liberates the words of the Old Testament.
- A comparison to understand the change. In a circle of friends, someone showed a photo where there was a man with a harsh face, with the finger raised, almost assaulting the public. All thought that he was an inflexible person, unpleasant, who distanced himself from others. At that moment, a boy arrived and said, "This is my father!" The others looked at him and said, "A harsh father, then!" The boy replied, "No, no, no! He is very loving. My father is a lawyer. That photo was taken in court when he was denouncing the crime of a landowner who wanted to dispossess a poor family of some unused land that they owned for a long time! My father won the case. The poor family was not deprived of its land!" All looked at the photo again and said, "What a beautiful photo!" Almost by miracle, a light was shed on the photo and it assumed a new look. That harsh face became bathed in great tenderness! The words of the son changed everything, while changing nothing! The words and actions of Jesus, born of his experience as son, received and raised by the Father, without changing one letter or comma, changed the whole meaning of the Old Testament (Mt 5: 17-18). The same God, who seemed so distant and harsh, took on the traits of a good Father, full of tenderness!

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene:

- Mary Magdalene was one of the few who had the courage to stay with Jesus until the time of his death on the cross. She goes back to the tomb to be where she had been with the Beloved for the last time. She looks for Jesus with whom she had lived for the last three years. The disciples from Emmaus will see Jesus, but will not recognise him (Lk 24: 15-16). The same thing happens to Mary Magdalene. She sees Jesus, but does not recognise him. She thinks he is the gardener. But she is looking for the Jesus of the past, the same as he was three days previously. The image of Jesus as he was stops her from recognising the living Jesus, present before her.
- Jesus pronounces the name "Mary!" This was the signal for her to recognise him: the same voice, the same manner of saying the name. She replies, "Master!" Jesus has come back, and it was the same Jesus who had died on the cross. Her first impression is that death was just a painful incident along the way, and that now all

was back as it was before. Mary embraces Jesus strongly. It was the same Jesus she knew.

- In fact, it is the same Jesus, but the manner of being with her is not the same. Jesus says to her, "Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father!" He will go to the Father. Mary Magdalene must leave Jesus and take on her mission: to announce to the brothers that Jesus has ascended to the Father. Jesus opened the way for us and brought God close to us again.
- The way the apparition of Jesus to Mary Magdalene is described makes us realize the stages of the journey she has to go through, from the painful search to the new encounter of Easter. These too are the stages we all have to go through in our lives, the search for God by living the Gospel.

Psalm 27 (26)

God is My Victory

Yahweh is my light and my salvation, whom should I fear?

Yahweh is the fortress of my life, whom should I dread?

When the wicked advance against me to eat me up, they, my opponents, my enemies, are the ones who stumble and fall.

Though an army pitch camp against me, my heart will not fear, though war break out against me, my trust will never be shaken.

One thing I ask of Yahweh, one thing I seek: to dwell in Yahweh's house all the days of my life, to enjoy the sweetness of Yahweh, to seek out his temple.

For he hides me away under his roof on the day of evil, he folds me in the recesses of his tent, sets me high on a rock.

Now my head is held high above the enemies who surround me; in his tent I will offer sacrifices of acclaim. I will sing, I will make music for Yahweh. Yahweh, hear my voice as I cry, pity me, answer me!

Of you my heart has said, 'Seek his face!' Your face, Yahweh, I seek; do not turn away from me.

Do not thrust aside your servant in anger, without you I am helpless.

Never leave me, never forsake me, God, my Savior.

Though my father and mother forsake me, Yahweh will gather me up.

Yahweh, teach me your way, lead me on the path of integrity because of my enemies; do not abandon me to the will of my foes -- false witnesses have risen against me, and are breathing out violence.

This I believe: I shall see the goodness of Yahweh, in the land of the living.

Put your hope in Yahweh, be strong, let your heart be bold, put your hope in Yahweh.

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 10, 2023

Easter Season

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 11, 2023

Easter Season

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: 30-3).

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 12, 2023

Easter Season

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 recognising 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 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 13, 2023

Easter Season

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 Co 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.
- (b) 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 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 some times? 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 14, 2023

Easter Season

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 15, 2023

Easter Season

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 Co 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 Co 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 16, 2023

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 your 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:

- John 20: 19-20: appearance to the disciples and showing of the wounds
- John 20: 21-23: gift of the Spirit for the mission
- John 20: 24-26: special appearance to Thomas eight days later
- John 20: 27-29: dialogue with Thomas
- John 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 "twins" through 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 eyewitnesses (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 eyewitnesses. 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 personally resolve 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 for ever!

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 marvelous 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 17, 2023

Easter Season

Opening Prayer

Lord God, our Father,

you are not far away from any of us, for in you we live and move and exist and you live in us through your Holy Spirit. Be indeed with us, Lord, send us your Holy Spirit of truth and through him deepen our understanding of the life and message of your Son, that we may accept the full truth and live by it consistently.

We ask you this through Christ our Lord.

Gospel Reading - John 3: 1-8

There was one of the Pharisees called Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, who came to Jesus by night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him.' Jesus answered: In all truth I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Nicodemus said, 'How can anyone who is already old be born? Is it possible to go back into the womb again and be born?'

Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born through water and the Spirit; what is born of human nature is human; what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised when I say: 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.

Reflection

The Gospel today presents part of the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus. Nicodemus appears several times in the Gospel of:

- John (Jn 3: 1-13; 7: 50-52; 19: 39). He was a person who held a certain social position. He was a leader among the Jews and formed part of the supreme tribunal, called the Synedrium. In the Gospel of John, he represents the group of Jews who were pious and sincere, but who did not succeed in understanding everything which Jesus said and did. Nicodemus had heard about the signs and the wonderful things that Jesus did, and he was struck, amazed. He wanted to speak with Jesus in order to understand better. He was a cultured person, who thought he believed the things of God. He expected the Messiah with the Book of the Law in his hand to verify if the novelty announced by Jesus would arrive. Jesus makes Nicodemus understand that the only way to understand the things of God is to be born again! Today this same thing happens. Some like Nicodemus: accept as new only what agrees with their ideas. What does not agree with their ideas is rejected and considered contrary to tradition. Others allow themselves to be surprised from facts and are not afraid to say: "I have been born anew!"
- John 3: 1 -- A man called Nicodemus. Shortly before the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus, the Evangelist was speaking of the imperfect faith of certain persons who were interested only in the miracles of Jesus (Jn 2: 23-25). Nicodemus was one of these persons. He had good will, but his faith was still imperfect. The conversation with Jesus helped him to perceive that he has to advance in order to be able to deepen his faith in Jesus and in God.
- John 3: 2 -- 1st question of Nicodemus: the tension between what is old and what is new. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a prominent person among the Jews and with a

good common sense. He went to meet Jesus at night and said to him: "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one could perform the signs that you do unless God were with him". Nicodemus gives an opinion of Jesus according to arguments which he, Nicodemus himself, has within himself. This is already important, but it is not enough to know Jesus. The signs which Jesus works can arouse a person and awake in the person some interest. They can generate curiosity, but they do not generate greater faith. They do not make one see the Kingdom of God present in Jesus. For this reason, it is necessary to advance, to take one more step. Which is this step?

- John 3: 3: The response of Jesus: "You must be born again!" In order that Nicodemus can perceive the Kingdom present in Jesus, he should be born again, from above. Anyone who tries to understand Jesus only from his arguments alone does not succeed to understand him. Jesus is much greater. If Nicodemus remains only with the catechism of the past in his hand, he will not succeed to understand Jesus. He should open his hand completely. He should set aside his own certainties and his security and abandon himself totally. He should make a choice between, on the one hand, the security which comes from the organized religion with its laws and traditions and, on the other hand, launch himself to the adventure of the Spirit which Jesus proposes to him.
- John 3: 4: 2nd question of Nicodemus: How can anyone who is already old be born again? Nicodemus does not give in and returns with the same question with a certain irony: "How can a man be born when he is old? Is it possible to go back into the womb again and be born again?" Nicodemus takes the words of Jesus literally and, because of this, he understands nothing. He should have perceived that the words of Jesus had a symbolic sense.
- John 3: 5-8: The answer of Jesus: To be born from above, to be born from the Spirit. Jesus explains what it means: to be born from above or to be born again. It is "To be born from water and the Spirit." Here we have a very clear reference to Baptism. Through the conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus, the Evangelist invites us to review our Baptism. He gives the following words: "What is born of human nature is human, what is born of the Spirit is Spirit." Flesh means that which is born only from our ideas. What is born from us is within our reach. To be born of the Spirit is another thing! The Spirit is like the wind. "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 anyone who is born of the Spirit." The wind has within itself, a direction, a route. We perceive the direction of the wind, for example, the North wind or the wind coming from the South, but we do not know, nor can we control the cause why the wind moves in this or that direction. This is the way the Spirit is. "No one is the master of the Spirit" (Ecl 8: 8). What characterizes the wind best, the Spirit, is liberty. The wind, the Spirit, is free, He cannot be controlled. He acts on others and nobody can act on him. His origin is a mystery. The boat must first find the route of the wind. Then it has to place the sails according to that route. That is what Nicodemus should do and what we should all do.
- A key to understand better the words of Jesus on the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew language uses the same word to say wind and spirit. As we have said the wind has within it a route, a direction: the North wind, the wind from the South. The Spirit of God has a route, a project, which already manifested itself in creation. The Spirit was present in creation under the form of a bird which flew over the waters of the chaos (Jn 1: 2). Year after year, he renews the face of the earth and sets nature through the sequence of the seasons (Ps 104: 30; 147: 18). The same is also present in history. He makes the Red Sea move back (Ex 14: 21) and he gives quails to the

people to eat (Nb 11, 31). He accompanies Moses and, beginning with him, he distributes the leaders of the people (Nb 11: 24-25). He took the leaders and took them to carry out liberating actions: Othniel (Jg 3: 10), Gideon (Jg 6: 34), Jephthah (Jg 11: 29), Samson (Jg 13: 25; 14: 6, 19; 15: 14), Saul (1S 11: 6), and Deborah, the prophetess (Jg 4: 4). He is present in the group of the prophets and acts in them with the force which is contagious (1S 10: 5-6, 10), his action in the prophets produces envy in the others. But Moses reacts: "If only all Yahweh's people were prophets, and Yahweh had given them his spirit!" (Nb 11: 29).

- All along the centuries the hope grew that the Spirit of God would have oriented the Messiah in the realization of God's project (Is 11: 1-9) and it would have descended upon all the people of God (Ez 36: 27; 39: 29; Is 32: 15; 44: 3). The great promise of the Spirit appears in various ways in the prophets of the exile: the vision of the dry bones, risen by the force of the Spirit of God (Ez 37:, 1-14); the effusion of the Spirit of God on all the people (Jl 3: 1-5); the vision of the Messiah-Servant who will be anointed by the Spirit to establish the right on earth and announce the Good News to the poor (Is 42: 1; 44: 1-3; 61: 1-3). They perceive a future, in which people, always more and more, are reborn thanks to the effusion of the Spirit (Ez 36: 26-27; Ps 51: 12; cf. Is 32: 15-20).
- The Gospel of John uses many images and symbols to signify the action of the Spirit. Just like in creation (Gn 1: 1), in the same way the Spirit descended upon Jesus "like a dove, coming from heaven" (Jn 1: 32). It is the beginning of the new creation! Jesus pronounces the words of God and communicates to us His Spirit (Jn 3: 34). His words are spirit and life (Jn 6: 63). When Jesus announces that he is going to the Father, he says that he will send another Consoler, another defender, so that he can remain with us. He is the Holy Spirit (Jn 14: 16-17). Through his Passion, death and resurrection, Jesus obtains for us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through Baptism all of us receive this same Spirit of Jesus (Jn 1: 33). When he appears to the Apostles, he breathes on them and says: "Receive the Holy Spirit!" (Jn 20: 22). The Spirit is like the water which springs up from 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 are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins they are retained" (Jn 20: 23). The Spirit is given to us in order to be able to remember and understand the full meaning of the words of Jesus (Jn 14: 26; 16: 12-13). Animated by the Spirit of Jesus we can adore God any place (Jn 4: 23-24). Here is realized the liberty of the Spirit of whom Saint Paul speaks: "Where the Spirit is, there is liberty" (2 Co 3: 17).

Personal Questions

- How do you react before the new things which present themselves; like Nicodemus or do you accept God's surprises?
- Jesus compares the action of the Holy Spirit with the wind (Jn 3: 8). What does this comparison reveal to me about the action of the Spirit of God in my life? Have you already had some experience which has given you the impression of being born again?

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)

Tuesday, April 18, 2023

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. Amen.

Gospel Reading - John 3: 7b-15

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus answered and said to him, 'How can this happen?' Jesus answered and said to him, "You are the teacher of Israel and you do not understand this? Amen, amen, I say to you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

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 newness 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 in mind the problems of the communities for which they write. Nicodemus' questions to Jesus are a reflection of the questions of the communities of Asia Minor at the end of the first century. For this reason, Jesus' answers 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 people have to be reborn of 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 of 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" (Eccl 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: Jesus' answer: Faith comes from witness and not from miracle. Jesus changes the question: "You are the Teacher of Israel and you do not know these things?" For Jesus, if people believe only when things are according to their own arguments and ideas, then 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? What did it consist of?
- 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 set the sails of your life in sync with the wind of the Spirit?
- The action of the Holy Spirit, like the wind, is often not like a hurricane, but rather like a small voice (1Kgs 19: 11) – a whisper of the wind. Am I attentive enough to hear when the Holy Spirit speaks to me so softly?

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 19, 2023

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 eyewitnesses 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 20, 2023

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 Co 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. (S 34: 3, 8)

Friday, April 21, 2023

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 (I 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 22, 2023

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 (Ap 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; Pro 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 23, 2023

Third 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 – Luke 24: 13-35

A Key to Guide the Reading:

Let us read the text where Luke presents Jesus as interpreting the Scriptures. As we read, let us seek to discover the various steps taken by Jesus in the process of this interpretation, from the moment he meets the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, to the time the disciples meet with the community in Jerusalem.

A Division of the Text to Assist a Careful Reading:

- Lk 24: 13-24: Jesus tries to find out what it is that is making the two disciples distressed.
- Lk 24: 25-27: Jesus sheds the light of Scripture on the situation of the two disciples.
- Lk 24: 28-32: Jesus shares the bread and celebrates with the disciples.
- Lk 24: 33-35: The two disciples go to Jerusalem and share their experience of the resurrection with the community.

The Text:

13-24: Now 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.'

25-27: 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.

28-32: 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?'

33-35: They set out that instant and returned to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven assembled together with their companions, 34 who said to them, 'The Lord has indeed risen and has appeared to Simon.' 35 Then they told their story of what had happened on the road and how they had recognized him at the breaking of bread.

A Moment of Prayerful Silence

so that the Word of God may enter into us and enlighten our life.

Some Questions

to help us in our personal reflection.

- What part did you like best in this text? Why?
- What steps did Jesus take in interpreting the Scriptures from the time he met the two friends on the road up to the time the disciples went to the community in Jerusalem?
- In what manner of situation does Jesus meet the two disciples?
- What are the similarities and the differences between our present situation and that of the two disciples? What factors create a crisis of faith in our day and are the cause of sadness?
- What was the effect of Jesus' reading of the Bible on the life of the two disciples?
- Which points in the interpretation made by Jesus are a critique of our way of reading the Bible, and which are a confirmation?

A Key to the Reading

for those who wish to go deeper into the text.

The Context in which Luke is Writing:

- Luke is writing in about the year 85 for the Greek community of Asia Minor, who were living in difficult circumstances, due to factors both external and internal. Internally, there were divergent tendencies that made life together difficult: ex-Pharisees who wanted to impose the law of Moses (Acts 15: 1); those who followed John the Baptist more and who had not even heard of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19: 1-6); Jews who used the name of Jesus to drive out demons (Acts 19: 13); and those who said they were followers of Peter, others of Paul, others of Apollo, and others of Christ (1Cor 1: 12). Externally, persecution by the Roma Empire was growing (Ap 1: 9-10; 2: 3, 10, 13; 6: 9-10; 12: 16) plus the insidious infiltration of the dominant ideology of the Empire and of the official religion, much the same way communism today infiltrates all aspects of our life (Ap 2: 14, 20; 13: 14-16).
- Luke is writing to these communities that he may give them a sure direction in the midst of their difficulties and so that they may find the strength and light in living out their faith in Jesus. Luke writes a two-volume work: the Gospel and the Acts, and he has the same general aim, "to learn how well founded the teaching is that you have received" (Lk 1: 4). One of his specific aims is to show, through the beautiful story of the two disciples from Emmaus, how the community ought to read and interpret the Bible. Those walking the streets of Emmaus were the communities (and all of us). Each of us is and all of us together are companions of Cleophas (Lk 24: 18). With him we walk the streets of life, seeking a word of support and of guidance in the Word of God.
- The way Luke narrates the meeting of Jesus with the disciples from Emmaus, tells us how the communities of his time used the Bible and practiced what we today call the Lectio Divina or Prayerful Reading of the Bible. They used three aspects or steps in interpreting the Bible:

The Steps or Aspects Used in the Process of Interpreting the Scriptures:

- **First step: Start from facts (Lk 24: 13-24):**

Jesus meets the two friends who are experiencing feelings of fear and dispersion, of lack of trust and dismay. They were fleeing. The force of death, the cross, had killed in them all hope. Jesus approaches them and walks with them. He listens to their conversation and says: "What matters are you discussing as you walk along?" The prevailing ideology prevents them from understanding and having a critical conscience. "Our own hope had been that he would be the one to set Israel free, but..." (Lk 24,21).

What do those who suffer talk about today? What matters today put our faith in a state of crisis?

The first step is this: to approach people, listen to reality, problems; be capable of asking questions that help to look at reality more critically.

- **Second step: Make use of the Bible (Lk 24: 25-27)**

Jesus uses the Bible, not in order to give lessons on the Bible, but to shed light on the problem worrying the two friends, and thus shed light on the situation they were experiencing. With the help of the Bible, Jesus leads the two disciples into God's plan and shows them that God has not allowed history to go astray. Jesus does not use the Bible as an expert who knows everything, but as a companion who wishes to help his friends to remember things they had forgotten, namely, Moses and the Prophets. Jesus does not give his friends the feeling of being ignorant but seeks to create an ambient within which they can remember and thus arouse their memory.

The second step is this: with the help of the Bible, to shed light on the situation and transform the cross, symbol of death, into a symbol of life and of hope. In this manner, that which prevents us from seeing, becomes light and strength along our way.

- **Third step: Celebrating and sharing in community (Lk 24: 28-32)**

The Bible alone does not open their eyes but makes their hearts burn! (Lk 24,32).

That which opens the eyes of the friends and allows them to discover the presence of Jesus is the sharing of the bread, the communitarian gesture, the celebration. As soon as they recognise Jesus, he disappears. And they then experience the resurrection, they are reborn and walk on their own. Jesus does not take over his friends' journey. He is not paternalistic. Now that they are risen, the disciples can walk on their own two feet.

The third step is this: we must know how to create a prayerful and fraternal atmosphere where the Spirit is free to act. It is the Spirit who allows us to discover and experience the Word of God in our lives and leads us to understand the meaning of Jesus' words (Jn 14,26; 16,13). It is especially at this point of the celebration that the practice of basic ecclesial communities, sustained by the margins of the world, help us religious once more to come across and drink from the ancient well of Tradition.

- **Aim: To rise and go towards Jerusalem (Lk 24: 33-35)**

Everything has changed in the two disciples. They themselves rise, regain courage and go back to Jerusalem, where the forces of death that killed Jesus are still at work, but where also there are the forces of life in the sharing of the experience of the resurrection. Courage in place of fear. Return in place of flight. Faith in place of its absence. Hope in place of despair. A critical conscience in place of fatalism before

power. Freedom in place of oppression. In a word, life in place of death! And in place of the news of the death of Jesus, the Good News of his Resurrection!

This is the aim of reading the Bible: to experience the presence of Jesus and of his Spirit in our midst. It is the Spirit who opens our eyes to the Bible and to reality and draws us to share the experience of the Resurrection, as it is true even to this day, in community meetings.

The New Way of Jesus: a Prayerful Reading of the Bible:

- Often, it is not possible to understand whether the use of the OT in the Gospels comes from Jesus or an explanation given by early Christians who sought to express their faith in Jesus in this way. However, what cannot be denied is the frequent and constant use of the Bible by Jesus. A simple reading of the Gospels shows us that Jesus found his bearings in the Scriptures in the performance of his mission and in instructing his disciples and the crowd.
- At the root of Jesus' reading of the Bible is his experience of God as Father. His intimate relationship with the Father gives Jesus a new criterion, which places him in direct contact with the author of the Bible. Jesus looks for meaning at the very source. He does not go from the writings to their root, but from the root to the writings. The comparison of the photo, as described in the *Lectio Divina* of Easter Sunday, helps us to shed light on this topic. As by a miracle, the photo of the harsh face was lit up and acquired traits of great tenderness. The words, born of the lived experience of the son, transformed everything, without changing anything (see *Lectio Divina* for Easter Sunday).
- Thus, looking through the photos of the Old Testament, people in the time of Jesus, formed an idea of a very distant God, harsh, difficult to contact, whose name could not even be mouthed. But Jesus' words and actions, born of his experience as Son, without changing even one word (Mt 5: 18-19), transformed the whole meaning of the Old Testament. The God who seemed to be so distant and harsh acquires the features of a Father full of tenderness, always present, ready to welcome and liberate! This Good News of God, communicated by Jesus, is the new key to a re-reading of the whole of the Old Testament. The New Testament is a re-reading of the Old Testament done in the light of the new experience of God, revealed by Jesus. This different way of shedding light on life in the light of the Word of God, creates for him many conflicts, because it renders the small of this world critical, while it makes the great uncomfortable.
- When interpreting the Bible to the people, Jesus revealed the traits of God's face, the experience that he experienced of God as Father. To reveal God as Father was the source and aim of the Good News of Jesus. By his attitude, Jesus manifests God's love for his disciples. He reveals the Father and incarnates his love! Jesus was able to say, "To have seen me is to have seen the Father" (Jn 14: 9). Hence, the Father's Spirit was also with Jesus (Lk 4: 18) and went with him everywhere, from the incarnation (Lk 1: 35) to the beginning of his mission (Lk 4,14), even to the end, his death and resurrection (Acts 1: 8).
- Jesus, interpreter, educator, and master, was a meaningful person in the life of his disciples. He influenced their lives forever. To interpret the Bible does not mean just to teach truth for the other to live by. The content that Jesus wished to convey was not limited to words, but included actions and his way of relating to people. The content is never separate from the person who communicates it. The goodness and love that emerge from his words are part of the content. They are his nature. Good content without goodness is like spilt milk.

Psalm 23 (22)

God is Our Inheritance Forever

I shall not want;

he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

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 24, 2023

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: the 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 25, 2023

St. Mark the 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 forever.

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

Wednesday, April 26, 2023

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, for ever.

Gospel Reading - John 6: 35-40

Jesus said to the crowds, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. But I told you that although you have seen me, you do not believe. Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him 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. Verse 41 begins with 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 a superficial reading of it, avoiding 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 as 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 repercussions 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 against 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 reflections 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 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

- What do I know about Judaism – the religion of Jesus, its history and its beliefs?
- What do I know, or what can I learn, about the various groups within Judaism at the time of Jesus, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and so on? With that deeper understanding, can I use it to better understand the life of Jesus?
- 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 27, 2023

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 more tense.

- 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 28, 2023

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".

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.

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 29, 2023

Easter Time

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

After hearing it, many of his followers said, 'This is intolerable language. How could anyone accept it?'

Jesus was aware that his followers were complaining about it and said, 'Does this disturb you? What if you should see the Son of man ascend to where he was before? 'It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. 'But there are some of you who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the outset who did not believe and who was to betray him. He went on, 'This is why I told you that no one could come to me except by the gift of the Father.'

After this, many of his disciples went away and accompanied him no more. Then Jesus said to the Twelve, 'What about you, do you want to go away too?' Simon Peter answered, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we have come to know that you are the Holy One of God.'

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." These things which he says should not be taken literally. 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 of 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. Before the words of Jesus on "eat my flesh and drink my blood", many complained like the crowds in the desert (Jn 6: 60) and take the decision to break away from Jesus and with the community: "they went away and accompanied him no more" (Jn 6: 66).
- John 6: 67-71: Confession of Peter. At the end only the twelve remain with him. In the face of the crisis produced by his words and his gestures, Jesus turns toward his more intimate friends, represented there by the Twelve and says: "Do you want to go away also?" For Jesus it is not a question of having many people following him. Neither does he change the discourse when the message does not please. He speaks in order to reveal the Father and not to please anyone. He prefers to remain alone, and not be accompanied by persons who are not committed with the Father's project. Peter's response is beautiful: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the message of eternal life, and we believe; we have come to know that you are the Holy One of God!" Even without understanding everything, Peter accepts Jesus as Messiah and believes in him. In the name of the group he professes his faith in the broken bread and in his word. Jesus is the word and the bread which satisfies the new people of God (Dt 8: 3). In spite of all his limitations, Peter is not like Nicodemus who wanted to see all things clearly according to his own ideas. But among the twelve there was someone who did not accept the proposal of Jesus. In this more intimate circle there was an enemy (the Devil) (Jn 6: 70-71) "he who shares my table takes advantage of me" (Si 41: 10; Jn 13: 18).

Personal Questions

- 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?"
- I place myself in Jesus' place. Today many persons no longer follow Jesus. Whose fault is it?

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 30, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, send your Spirit to help us 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: 1-10

A Key to the Reading:

This Sunday's Gospel presents us with the familiar image of the Good Shepherd. When speaking of the sheep of God's flock, Jesus uses several images to describe the attitude of those who look after the flock. The text of the liturgy is taken from verses 1 to 10. In our commentary we add verses 11 to 18 because these contain the image of the "Good Shepherd" and help us better understand the sense of verses 1 to 10. During the reading, try to pay attention to the various images or similes that Jesus uses to present to us the way a true shepherd ought to be.

A Division of the Text as a Help to the Reading:

The text contains three interrelated similes:

- John 10: 1-5: The simile of the bandit and the shepherd
- John 10: 6-10: The simile of the door of the sheepfold
- John 10: 11-18: The simile of the good shepherd

The Text:

1 '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. 2 He who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the flock; 3 the gatekeeper lets him in, the sheep hear his voice, one by one he calls his own sheep and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all those that are his, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice.

5 They will never follow a stranger, but will run away from him because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.'

6 Jesus told them this parable but they failed to understand what he was saying to them. 7 So Jesus spoke to them again: In all truth I tell you, I am the gate of the sheepfold. 8 All who have come before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep took no notice of them. 9 I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe: such a one will go in and out and will find pasture. 10 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.

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 part of the text most touched you? Why?
- What images does Jesus apply to himself? How does he do that and what is their significance?
- In this text, how many times does Jesus use the word *life* and what does he say about life?
- **Pastor-Pastoral.** Do our *pastoral* actions carry on from the mission of Jesus-Pastor?
- How can we acquire a clear view of the true Jesus of the Gospels?

For Those Who Wish to Enter Deeper into the Theme

The Context Within Which the Gospel of John Was Written:

This is a further example of the way John's Gospel was written and organized. Jesus' words on the Shepherd (Jn 10: 1-18) are like a brick placed in an already built wall. Just before this text, in John 9: 40-41, Jesus was speaking the blindness of the Pharisees. Immediately after, in John 10: 19-21, we come across the conclusion of the discussion on blindness. Thus, the words concerning the Good Shepherd show how to remove such blindness. This brick renders the wall stronger and more beautiful.

- John 10: 1-5: The simile of the bandit and the shepherd

Jesus begins his discourse with the simile of the gate: "I tell you most solemnly, I am the gate of the sheepfold. All others who have come are thieves and brigands; but the sheep took no notice of them. I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe!" To understand this simile, we need to remember what comes after. In those days, shepherds took care of the sheep during the day. At night, they brought the sheep into a large sheepfold or common enclosure, well protected against thieves and wolves. All the shepherds within a region brought their flocks there. There was a guard who watched over the flock throughout the night. In the morning the shepherd would come and knock on the gate and the guard would open the gate. The shepherd then called the sheep by name. The sheep recognised the voice of their shepherd and so they got up and followed him to pastures. The sheep of other shepherds would hear the voice, but stayed where they were, because they did not recognize the voice. Every now and then there was the danger of an attack. Thieves went into the sheepfold through a kind of loophole by removing stones from the wall around and stole the sheep. They did not enter by the gate, because the guard was there watching.

- John 10: 6-10: The simile of the gate of the sheepfold
Those who were listening, the Pharisees, (Jn 9:40-41), could not understand what "entering by the gate" meant. Jesus explains: "I am the gate! All others who have come are thieves and brigands". To whom do these hard words of Jesus refer? Considering his way of speaking about brigands, he was probably referring to religious leaders who dragged people after them but did not fulfil their expectations. They were not interested in the welfare of the people, but rather in their money and their own interests. They deceived people and abandoned them to their fate. The basic criterion for discerning between the shepherd and the brigand is the defence of the **life of the sheep**. Jesus says: "I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full!" To enter by the gate, means imitating Jesus' attitude of defending the life of his sheep. Jesus asks people to take the initiative by not following those who pretend to be shepherds and who are not interested in their lives.
- John 10: 11-15: The simile of the Good Shepherd
Jesus changes the simile. First he was the *gate*, now he is the *shepherd*. Everyone knew what a shepherd was like, how he lived and worked. But Jesus is not just any shepherd, he is the *good* shepherd! The image of the *good* shepherd comes from the Old Testament. When Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd, he is presenting himself as the one who comes to fulfil the promises of the prophets and hopes of the people. He insists on two points: (a) In defending the life of his sheep, the *good shepherd gives his life*. (b) In the mutual understanding between shepherd and sheep, *the Shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know their shepherd*.
The false shepherd who wants to overcome his blindness, has to confront his own opinion with that of the people. This is what the Pharisees did not do. They looked down on the sheep and called them cursed and ignorant people (Jn 7: 49; 9: 34). On the other hand, Jesus says that the people have an infallible perception in knowing who is *the good shepherd*, because they recognize his voice (Jn 10: 4) "My own know me" (Jn 10: 14). The Pharisees thought they could discern the things of God with certainty. In truth they were blind.
The discourse on the Good Shepherd includes two important rules for removing pharisaic blindness from our eyes: (a) Shepherds are very attentive to the reaction of the sheep so that they may recognize the voice of the shepherd. (b) The sheep must be very attentive to the attitude of those who call themselves shepherds so as to

verify whether they are really interested in the lives of the sheep and whether they are capable of giving their lives for their sheep. What about today's shepherds?

- John 10: 16-18: *Jesus' aim: one flock and one shepherd*

Jesus opens out the horizon and says that there are other sheep that are not of this sheepfold. They will not hear Jesus' voice, but when they do, they will realize that he is the Shepherd and will follow him. Here we see the ecumenical attitude of the community of the "Beloved Disciple."

Further Comments:

The Image of the Shepherd in the Bible:

In Palestine, people largely depended on raising sheep and goats for their living. The image of the shepherd who leads his sheep to pasture was well known to all, just as today we all know the image of the driver of a coach or of a train. It was common to use the image of the shepherd to illustrate the function of one who ruled and led the people. The prophets criticized kings because they were shepherds who did not take care of their flock and did not lead the flock to pasture (Jer 2: 8; 10: 21; 23: 1-2). Such criticism of bad shepherds grew in the measure that, through the fault of kings, the people saw themselves dragged into slavery (Ez 34: 1-10; Zac 11: 4-17).

Before the frustration experienced because of the lack of leadership on the part of the bad shepherds, there grew the desire or the hope of one day having a shepherd who would be really good and sincere and who would be like God in the way of leading his people. Thus the Psalm says, "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want!" (Ps 23: 1-6; Gen 48: 15). The prophets hope that, in some future time, God himself would be the shepherd who would lead his flock (Is 40: 11; Ez 34: 11-16). They also hope that at such a time, the people would be able to recognize the voice of their shepherd: "Listen today to his voice!" (Ps 95: 7). They hope that God will come as a Judge to judge the sheep of the flock (Ez 34: 17). They wish and hope that one day God will raise good shepherds and that the Messiah would be a good shepherd for the people of God. (Jer 3: 15; 23: 4).

Jesus turns this hope into reality and presents himself as the Good Shepherd, different from the brigands who were despoiling the people. He presents himself as a Judge, who, at the end, will judge as a shepherd who will separate the sheep from the goats (Mt 25: 31-46). In Jesus is fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah who says that the good shepherd will be persecuted by the bad shepherds who are disturbed by his denunciations: "I am going to strike the shepherd so that the sheep may be scattered!" (Zec 13: 7). Finally, Jesus is everything: he is the gate, the shepherd and the lamb!

The Community of the Beloved Disciple: Open, Tolerant and Ecumenical:

The communities lying behind the Gospel of John were made up of various groups. Among them there were open-minded Jews with a critical view of the Temple of Jerusalem (Jn 2: 13-22) and the law (Jn 7: 49-50). There were Samaritans (Jn 4: 1-42) and pagans (Jn 12: 20) who became converts, both with their historical origins and cultural customs, quite different from those of the Jews. Even though they were made up of such different groups, John's communities will see the following of Jesus as a concrete lived love in solidarity. By respecting each other's differences, they will be aware of the problems arising from pagans and Jews living together, problems which troubled other communities at the time (Acts 15: 5). Challenged by the realities of their own time, the communities sought to deepen their faith in Jesus, sent by the Father who wishes that all should be brothers and sisters (Jn 15: 12-14, 17) and who says: "In my Father's house

there are many mansions!" (Jn 14: 2). This deepening facilitated dialogue with other groups. Then there were open, tolerant and ecumenical communities (Jn 10: 16).

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