

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER YEAR A

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

First Reading (Acts 6:1-7). The rapid growth of the Christian community created problems. The impoverished widows of the Hellenists (Jews raised in a Greek cultural environment) were not getting the material help that the native poor of Jerusalem received.

The Twelve wisely chose seven men of good repute from among the Hellenists and commissioned them to supervise the charitable works of the community. This enabled the Apostles to devote all their energies to their top priority – the ministry of the word (preaching and teaching). The passage shows how concerned the early Christians were to give practical expression to their Christianity.

Second Reading (1 Pet 2:4-9). This describes the responsibility and special dignity of Christians as members of the community of Christ, the Church. The community is likened to a building. The suffering and risen Lord is the foundation stone of this building. He is also a stumbling block for those who will not believe. The lives of Christians are an acceptable offering to God, and a source of blessing for others.

In vv. 9-10 Peter switches to the idea of covenant. He transfers titles formerly bestowed on Israel to the new community of Christ. It is a chosen race, a royal house and community of priests, a holy nation God has called out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Gospel (Jn 14:1-12). The Gospel contains a number of related themes. Jesus consoles his disciples who are distressed over his words about his going away. They should not be troubled; he is not abandoning them; he is going to prepare a home for them in the ample house of the Father.

He himself is the way to the Father. So close is the communion of Father and Son that one who looks on Jesus with the eyes of faith sees the Father, and sees that the “works” of Jesus are the achievement of the Father. And because Jesus is now the risen Lord present in their lives, they can do “greater works” than Jesus did in his public ministry.

One theme is common to all three readings: Christ continues his works in the world through his disciples.

Reflection:

Firstly, I would like to reflect on our faith in a time of crisis.

During the Last Supper the Apostles were thrown into crisis when Jesus started to talk about his death. Their hearts were troubled and filled with fear – and with good reason. That was a terrible night, not only for Jesus, but also for them. It was a night of upheaval and terror. Seeing their distress, Jesus said to them, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me.” Since the Apostles already believed, in effect what he was saying to them was, “You must *go on believing* in God and in me.”

From time to time we all experience fears, worries, anxieties. If it is severe it could even affect someone’s sleep and appetite. Because we are prone to fear, anxiety and worry, it is no wonder that several hundred times the Bible advises us not to worry. Why does the Bible keep telling us not to worry? Because our faith is weak, instead of looking to God, too often we focus on our problems. If we prayed more I’m sure we would see God sending us help.

Often at a time of crisis people feel that God has abandoned them. But Jesus assured the Apostles that, even though he was leaving them, he was not abandoning them. Rather, he was going to prepare a home for them, and would return to take them to that home. Hence, no matter what happened, they must go on believing, go on trusting in him and in the Father.

As you know, we are facing a coronavirus pandemic. There are millions of people who have been infected with this dangerous virus. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives through this virus. We need faith, strong faith in a time of crisis. At a time of crisis, like this pandemic time, that is the only thing we can do – go on stubbornly trusting in God. What faith does is assure us that God is with us in the midst of the crisis. It is the conviction that we are not alone, that we are not abandoned, that enables us to get through the crisis. We should remember that in all the difficult moments of our life there is planted a grace from God.

If we had more of Jesus in our lives we would have less fear, worries and anxieties. We would still have problems. God never promised that we would not have problems. Jesus himself had a big problem - he was sentenced to death as a common criminal. But Jesus rose on the third day and Jesus will help us rise above our difficulties too because as the second reading stated, Jesus is the “living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God” (1 Pet 2:4) If we try to live without Jesus, life will not go nearly as well for us as when we have Jesus at the center of our lives. We can overcome problems better with Jesus in our lives than without Jesus. If we turn our backs on Jesus how can we expect to succeed? Let us focus on Jesus and not on our problems. Again as our second reading stated, “Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame.” (1 Pet 2:6) When we have problems, let us turn to Jesus who is always waiting for us.

Secondly, I would like to reflect on Jesus as the way to lead us to the Father

In the Gospel today, Thomas speaks up first with his question about knowing the way to the Father's dwelling. He takes literally Jesus' statement about going 'to prepare a place for you' and returning; he wants a kind of road map. He wants to find his own way there, an indication that he does not fully trust Jesus as guide. In reply Jesus tells Thomas that, 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. Jesus is the way to Father, the only one through whom access to the Father and the Father's dwelling can be gained. "I am the way. No one can come to the Father except through me." What he was saying in effect was: "Follow me and I'll take you to the Father." In other words, he was offering himself as a guide.

For us as Christians, the way to God is the most important way of all. It is a way that has baffled many. At the Last Supper the apostle, Thomas, asked Jesus, "Show us the Father." The most important thing in the life of Jesus was his relationship with the Father. So Jesus knew the way to the Father. He says to us what he said to Thomas, "I am the way." And he invites us to follow him. If we follow him we will have a star that will not betray us, and a compass that will not lie to us. He will lead us to the Father's house. What does following Jesus involve? It involves following his way. In the Bible the word "way" is often used in a metaphorical sense. Often it designates a way of life and conduct. The early Christians called themselves Followers of the Way. By "way" they meant a Christian way of life. Jesus said, *'I am **the way**, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*" (John 14:6). Jesus is the way: The way to the Father, The way of life and The way to salvation. Jesus lived on earth to show us the way. To follow Him on this way means that we are to walk as he walked. We are to follow in his footsteps, living as he lived. A way indicates progression. When we follow Him we come to where he is now. Jesus calls this way "the narrow way." Matthew's Gospel tells us, *"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."* (Matthew 7:13-14). The narrow way is a way of action. It's not a way that goes through the flesh (Hebrew 10:20). In other words, to walk on the narrow way means that we give up our own will entirely. Our own thoughts about how our life should be led and our own desires. It means that we must overcome sin in the flesh, those things that are so natural to us, in order to do God's will. This includes things like laziness, self-seeking, greed, resentment, pride, etc. There are few who are willing to actually *walk* on this way, because to give up our own will, actually causes us suffering.

Everything that happens to us can work together for good. Everything we experience that causes our flesh to react and tempt us to sin is an opportunity to overcome it to a greater degree and become more and more free. "... *for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin ...*" And as this sinful nature is shed, the virtues of Christ – the fruits of the Spirit – grow. This is God's purpose for us – that we are transformed and conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:28-29). The way is the life that Jesus lived. If we follow Him on it and live a life of doing God's will instead of our own, then when we enter the kingdom of heaven and get to meet Him face to face, we will be like Him, and see Him as He is (1 John 3:2-3). *"Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."* (James 1:12).

Thirdly, I would like to reflect on an eternal home.

All we have, as St. Paul says, is a kind of tent. At death the tent is folded up. Hence, it is not only on earth that we need a home. We also need a home to go to when death brings down the curtain on the day of our life. Without such a home life would be a journey to nowhere.

At the Last Supper Jesus told the Apostles that he was “going away”. They rightly understood “going away” to mean that he was going to die. On hearing this they were overcome with sadness. But Jesus didn’t speak of death as life ending. He spoke of death as going to the Father. He consoled them with these words, which are among the loveliest in the Gospel: “There are many rooms in my Father’s house. I am going to prepare a place for you. I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be to.” This means that we have an eternal home to go to, namely, the Father’s house.

For a child, home is not so much a place as a relationship of love and trust. A child can move around a lot and not feel homeless, as long as its parents are there. It is the same for those who have a close relationship with God. We spend our lives searching for God, and going our way towards God. To die is to go to God, and to go to God is to go home, eternal home.

There remains the question of how to get there. Jesus says to us what he said to Thomas: ‘I am the way.’ And he invites us to follow him. Those who follow him will have a star that will not betray them, and a compass that will not lie to them. He will lead us to the Father’s house.

Conclusion: We Christians have a purpose here on earth and a destination in eternity with a leader to help us see both. That big picture helps us keep the details of our life in perspective. In Jesus Christ, we have the way, the truth and the life. In him we have a guide, a map, and a destination. If we try to follow the Lord every day, as he gives us the light, he will guide us to where we ought to be – our heavenly Father’s dwelling. Amen.

Happy Mother’s Day!

Fr Tao Pham