

EASTER 6, YEAR C

Many years ago, when I was much younger, I was having a conversation with a much older priest for whom I had great respect, knowing him to be wise and totally dedicated. Out of the blue he said to me, “Do you enjoy being as priest, Jim?” I was taken aback at the unexpected question and somewhat irked by it, I remember. “Why are you asking me that?”, I shot back. He smiled and said, “Oh, it’s just that I very much enjoy being a priest and wondered if you do too”. On reflection later, I wondered whether I showed my enjoyment all that much – perhaps I was more taken up with my obligations and responsibilities, the difficulties and setbacks than with projecting joy and satisfaction. I’m grateful to my priestly colleague for making me aware of the need to bear a lot more witness to the joy of the gospel, to let it show! Joy: that core peace, harmony and contentment which is always present despite any surface trauma, setbacks, all kinds of difficulties. When you read or pray the Psalms, you can’t help noticing that however much doubt, disappointment, anger, questioning of God’s presence in trouble, they overwhelmingly invariably end up asserting the goodness and faithfulness of God, who deserves praise and thanksgiving for the wonders of his love. That’s what the gift of joy brings about. St. Paul didn’t have his troubles to seek – he’s quite frank, in his letters to the churches, about what he’s had to go through in his ministry, a long list of troubles and disappointments. Yet he could say, in his Letter to the Church at Philippi written from prison: “rejoice in the Lord always”, and, for good measure, “and again I say, rejoice”.

Jesus Himself, throughout his ministry, was assailed by setbacks, misunderstandings, harassment, threats. Yet Luke, in one of the texts I always find very moving, tells us this: “In that same hour, Jesus was filled with joy by the Holy Spirit...” Which leads me to put to you, my brothers and sisters, the question like the one I was asked: Do you enjoy being a Christian? Do you enjoy this coming together on a Sunday morning to worship God together? This joy comes from knowing that, come what may, God’s love is forever being shared with us. God’s faithfulness, God’s mercy and compassion, God’s forgiveness are ours always. The Scriptures bear their witness to this overwhelming experience of God’s people of both Old and New Covenants. This is, in fact, the Good News proclaimed by Jesus, the fullest proof of our infinite value in God’s sight. But this joy-giving proclamation can appear hidden far too often in church communities.

Without this heartfelt joy the good news is blunted, seen as a set of rigid and burdensome obligations, with talk of sacrifice and impossible demands. If this is what people witness it is hardly likely that they'll be attracted to the gospel message with its wonderful promise of fullness of life. As the community of faith gathered here, surely we should expect to be challenged to examine how we ourselves have embraced the central message about God's love, God's ever-strengthening presence, about the unending outpouring of God's grace.

The three Scripture Lessons today offer excellent encouragement for us all. Take the first reading from Acts. Who's in charge of the spreading of the gospel message? Paul? It seems not. It's the Holy Spirit, no less! Twice Paul is prevented from going to Asia to begin his missionary work there – by the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus! Instead he's given a powerful nudge to get himself to Europe to spread the word of God. This saves Paul from a lot of difficult decision-making! And it all works out! Paul is able to lay a good solid foundation in an important city of the Roman Empire, and resources are provided by a very rich lady who is deeply impressed by Paul's preaching. We are not left alone in our call to bear witness to the gospel message. The gospel reading takes this assurance of God's guidance and assistance a lot further. Listen to what Jesus tells the apostles during his final meal with them: "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all I have said to you". No need, then, for hesitation or faint-heartedness. "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid". All these promises and assurances are for us too – in fact, we're gathered together like this to hear them again and again, lest we forget or falter. A little later, during that same meal, Jesus tells the apostles: "Your hearts will be full of joy and no one will take your joy from you". And here we are at a meal with Jesus present, and the same words he spoke to the apostles are shared with us here and now! Remember what I asked earlier on: do you enjoy being a Christian? We must let it show, in every word, in everything we do. In that way the very heart of the good news of Jesus is being proclaimed – the infinite goodness of God, the faithfulness of God, God's love beyond all telling. The Book of Acts tells that Paul was preaching beside a river. Oddly enough, the story of our salvation begins by a river, in the Garden of Eden (*Genesis 2.6 and 9*). And this story takes a mighty leap by what happened by the River Jordan, when God proclaimed Jesus as the beloved Son, opening up the very heavens in witness (*Mark 1.9-11*). And in the 2nd Lesson we learn about the final stage of that story of our salvation, the heavenly Jerusalem, where John (the author of

the Book of Revelation) is shown, in the middle of the city, “the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God”. On either side of the river is the ‘tree of life’, John tell us. That rings loud bells! And it should, because, we’re told in Genesis, in the middle of the garden God “set the tree of life”. Now what else would the cross of Jesus come to mean for us but the ‘tree of life’ for everyone, through which God’s plan of love was accomplished. Quite a story of eternal faithfulness on God’s part, a story full of mercy and love from the very beginning through to its glorious end. John, in his gospel has Jesus, at the conclusion of one of the great Jewish festivals, make this declaration: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture says, ‘out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’. John continues: “Now he said this about the Spirit which believers were to receive”. (*John 7.37-39*).

Well, we certainly have the message we should be proclaiming, a simple but profoundly uplifting one – about God’s infinite and steadfast love, shown above all in the gift of His Son who emptied himself so that we might be filled with the untold treasures of God’s love and grace. We certainly have been given the tools to enable us to proclaim this incredible gospel, the sacred tools of Scripture and the presence of God’s Spirit. May that same Spirit, sent by Jesus and the Father, give us always the joy of heart to live that message ourselves and so proclaim it to others with vigour and enthusiasm. Verbs in the gospel are almost always in the imperative, always active: “Go.....tell...heal...forgive....pray....believe....love.

Our Eucharist will end today by our being told to “go...love...serve...”. And our reply will reveal in whose name and with whose help we shall do all of these things. And may the joy of Christ fill our hearts all the days of our lives.

Other Scripture References:

Phil.4.4; Luke 10.21; Acts 16.8-10, 11-15; John14.1,26; John 16.22; Rev.22.1-2

(Reverend) Jim Thomson

Sunday, May 26, 2019

(3)

