



FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER 2008 APRIL 20, 2008

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ACTS 6:1-7 1 PETER 2:4-9 JOHN 14:1-12

In the course of my life as a Jesuit I have had more than a few different jobs. I've taught studio art and art history at the college level. As the Minister of a Theologate community I've taken care of the material needs of a community of over one hundred Jesuits. I've been the Rector of a college community of thirty-five, and I've been the Undergraduate Dean of Arts and Sciences. Of course I've been a parish pastor, as well as a few other things in the thirty-three years since ordination. In each of those jobs it has always been very clear to me what the primary focus had to be, but in each of those jobs I also found that there were always an array of secondary and tertiary foci which seemed to draw ones attention from what was most important and seemed to eat up most of the available time and energy.

If you've had something of the same experience then I think you probably have sympathy for the Apostles as we meet them in today's Reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*. As the community of believers grew, complaints began to register that one group of widows was not receiving their necessary food allowance. The Apostles believed that the focus of their work, the mission handed over to them by the Risen Lord was to devote their selves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. They seem aware that when they neglected this primary focus because other things, even other very good things had to be done, then everything seemed somehow to suffer. And so, they saw the need for assistance that would take care of the material needs of the entire community. The office of deacon was established with Stephen and his six companions whose job it was to take care of the material needs of that first community with their primary duty the distribution of food.

As we read our way through *Acts* and the Epistles we can see with the establishment of deacons, presbyters, and bishops, the governing structure of the Church begins to grow and to take form. Unfortunately in seeing this development we can loose sight of the more important structure or makeup that underlies all of this, one which is made clear by Peter in our reading from his first letter this morning. We might think of Peter here speaking to his fellow Apostles or to those presbyters in the various Christian communities established in the Roman world, but his message is to all those who believe in the Risen Christ. He first tells us that we should be like living stones who are built into a spiritual house and a holy priesthood that offers spiritual sacrifice to God through Jesus Christ. He then concludes by telling us all that we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of His own."

Here in Peter's words we find who we are, and there, perhaps, the focus of our lives as Christians. We are God's! We are His people, His nation, His chosen race, and His royal

priesthood. We share in the universal priesthood of believers which means that we offer spiritual sacrifice by living out our Christian life in the world. Here it seems to me is the focus of our lives as Christians: we live out our common priesthood by simply living our lives as a sacrifice of praise. This is not the same as the cultic priesthood of the ordained, but is an ethical priesthood determined in the everyday living out of our lives. *How do we do that? How is living our lives a spiritual sacrifice?* We need to look to our Gospel this day to understand how such a life is accomplished. Our Gospel takes up the Lord's Last Supper after Jesus has washed the feet of His Apostles and told them that they are to be servants to all. Seeing their confusion and sadness He tells them that He must go to the Father's house to prepare a place for them. Thomas asks where He is going, and when Jesus replies, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." The Apostles are still confused, and He replies that all they have to do to get to the Father is to follow Him; He who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

But what does that mean for us? How are we to understand what He means by the way, the truth, and the life? Perhaps it is simpler than we think. He tells us that He is the "Way". The Old Testament is full of references to the "way." Moses tells the people that they must walk in the way of the Lord. Isaiah encourages the people: "This is the way of the Lord, walk by it." And in many of the Psalms we beg, "Teach us your ways, O Lord." In our Gospel today, however, Jesus applies the "Way" directly to Himself. Yet, He is not telling us to follow the same geographical route through the hills and valleys of Palestine, but to live as He lived since He is the fullest expression of God's love. So to live out our lives in the universal priesthood of believers we take on the attitudes and values of Christ. Compassion, concern, love become the guideposts for our lives.

He also tells us that He is the "Truth". A little later in John's Gospel as Jesus stands before Pilate He says, "For this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the Truth. Everyone who is of the Truth hears My voice." By living His life in conformity to the Father's will, Jesus is the embodiment of truth; He is what it means to be truly human. To follow the truth that Jesus is means that we try to model what it means to be fully human. Every word and every action of Christ's spoke the truth, but not without sacrifice in a world where lies possess real weight and power. To be truth in our own day, to be truthful to our call as Christian means that we too might be called to sacrifice when subterfuge and lies might be the easier way out.

Jesus tells the Apostles that He is the "Life." In the Psalms we often voice the plea for the "path of life" meaning what gives life value or makes it worth living. Jesus opens for us the way to eternal life, by showing us how to live here and now as God's children. Finally it is through His Passion, Death and Resurrection that He gains for us eternal life with Him, the Father and the Spirit.

In following Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we offer the oblation of our own lives with His so that we might be in union with Him. It is not easy, and perhaps, it is much more difficult than we think, if we only take the time to consider what the Lord calls us to.

In his homily to the bishops at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in DC this past week, Pope Benedict both praised the religiosity of American Catholics, and offered some questions for the consideration of the country's bishops. He said the following: *“This leads me to ask how, in the 21st century, a bishop can best fulfill the call to “make all things new in Christ, our hope”? How can he lead his people to “an encounter with the living God”, the source of that life-transforming hope of which the Gospel speaks? Perhaps he needs to begin by clearing away some of the barriers to such an encounter. While it is true that this country is marked by a genuinely religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior. Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in Church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching, or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to death? Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.”*

In other words the Holy Father is telling us that our faith cannot be taken lightly, nor can our lives be divided into convenient compartments where our beliefs have no effect on our lived lives. Such beliefs are meaningless and are nothing but self deception. If we are to fulfill our mission as Christians who share in the universal priesthood we must be willing to let our faith confront and wrestle with the issues and the moral and ethical questions which are part of our society. In such confrontations we encounter the spiritual sacrifice of which St. Peter speaks and come to an understanding and embracing of the truth.

Here again it is the image of Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Light that must lead us. To follow Christ's way means that we often come in conflict with the values of a self-indulgent society just as Christ did. To seek the truth means that we must often expose lies for what they are even at the expense of our own comfort. To seek the life which Christ offers us means that we have to place the proper value on the life this world offers, seeing beyond its deception and lies to a life that truly matters and has meaning. If we can truly focus on what is most important in our lives as Christians we might conclude with St. Paul in his Letter to the Galatians, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.”