

Sunday By Sunday

Our Regular Guide to the Word Of God in the Sunday Liturgy
From the FAITH Magazine May-June 2004

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER: C

02.05.04 Jn 10, 27-30

1. "The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice" (Jn 10, 27). Listening is often the opposite to hearing. There is a world of difference between someone who hears but does not listen, and someone who actually listens to what he has heard. People of each type may live on the same street, or even in the same house, but they do not inhabit the same universe. Listening means self-sacrifice. It means leaving self behind in order to look into the heart of another in response to whatever means of communication they adopt, be that words spoken or written, or even behaviour.

2. Multi-media, mass communications, mobile phones, conference calling and video links promote instant product and instant availability, but very rarely instant listening. It is not relevant too where sales, profit, market share and cost savings dominate human living together. But the more frenetic these things become, the more they stultify the human spirit - made by God for God. Man is not made to be mastered by technology or economics; he is made to be free, and he is free in so far as he inheres to God.

3. Jesus speaks, though he does not shout. His voice is clear and insistent, but he does not force us to listen. Since he is Truth itself, he has a force and power to provoke the hearts and consciences of sinners to listen. He satisfies our deepest yearnings because he made us. Not only that, he then became like us so that we, in our turn, could become like him. His voice offers us eternal life (Jn 10, 28), if we listen and believe. This life is no less than the indwelling of God here and now, internal and eternal. Let us then listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER: C

09.05.04 Jn 13, 31-35

1. There is an unbearable poignancy about the context in which Jesus solemnly lays before us the new commandment, "Love one another; just as I have loved you" (Jn 13, 34). Judas has just gone out to do the work of Satan, and betray the Son of Man - the supreme act of treachery. Yet, surely the timing merely

serves to underline the potency and necessity of what the Lord Jesus commands. It is easy to love those who love you. What distinguishes Christian love is that it is never more powerful than when rejected. Sanctity is attained only in the face of this world's hatred.

2. The "Now" at the beginning of this gospel (Jn 13, 31) heralds the beginning of the Passion of Christ according to John, inaugurated as it just has been by the slipping away of Judas into the night (Jn 13, 30). Mel Gibson's recent film, "The Passion of Christ" brings out the sheer brutality of the way that Jesus was to be tortured and executed. In full knowledge of the barbarity to come, Our Lord pours out his heart in the sublime teachings of the Farewell Discourses (Jn 13, 31- 17, 26). Only by imitating him in his self-sacrificing love will all people know that we are his disciples.

3. There can be little doubt that these Farewell Discourses bear the marks of later editing. But they also contain the eyewitness recall of the disciple whom Jesus loved - John the Evangelist, who lent upon the breast of Christ, as the Tradition of the Church upholds. They are the swansong of the Messiah, reaching a peak with the promise of the Holy Spirit to come down on the fledgling Church built upon the Apostles (Jn 16, 7) in order to lead them into the fulness of the truth and ensure that unity and oneness that has always been the mark of the true Church.

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER: C

16.05.04 Jn 14, 23-29

1. Jesus comes to reveal the Father to us, and to draw us into the superabundant life of the Blessed Trinity. The Spirit, sent by the Father in the name of the Son (Jn 14, 26) teaches the truth, reminds us of all that Jesus has said, and bequeaths a peace the world cannot give (Jn 14, 26ff). Our Lord reveals the Blessed Trinity not as a dry, static concept, but as a dynamic personal law of life that fulfils and sustains human beings. All is gift, with no deserving on the part of man. The God of holiness reveals himself in the intimacy of believing hearts.

2. 'Home' (Jn 14, 23) is an important Johannine concept, adding a depth and richness to the quality of divine loving revealed specifically by the Fourth Evangelist. John had been a direct witness to the intimate charity of Jesus when he first met the divine Master: "so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him the rest of that day. It was about the tenth hour" (Jn 1, 39). The disciples, including John, were captivated from the first moment they crossed the threshold of divine intimacy. It was not so much the house where Jesus stayed that moved them as the environment of love.

3. Now, before his Passion, Jesus promises to set up this environment of divine loving and intimacy in the hearts and souls of those who keep his word (Jn 14, 23ff). It will be the fruit of the gift of peace that the Holy Spirit will establish within those who believe in Christ and keep his commandments. Father and Son will establish heaven in human hearts in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is in this context that Jesus can say without the slightest irony to future apostolic martyrs before his own bitter suffering, “Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid” (Jn 14, 27)

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER: C

23.05.04 Jn 17, 20-26

1. “Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you” (Jn 17, 21). The Priestly Prayer of Christ can also be seen as a beautiful meditation on the unity and divine grace at the heart of the sacrament of matrimony. In his Farewell Discourses, Jesus reveals the divine life at the heart of the Blessed Trinity. This is such an outpouring of love between Father and Son in time and eternity that it is too much for the disciples then and there. The Holy Spirit must guide them into the fullness of all that Jesus has said (Jn 14, 26).

2. God is revealed not as a static concept out there, but as dynamic, burning love at the core of being. This divine loving is characterized by its unity and its universality. It binds the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity in oneness of nature, and fills time and eternity. Married love as a sacrament is an invitation, won by the cross and resurrection of Jesus, extended to husband and wife, asking them to open themselves to this love that exists within the Godhead. In doing this they will mirror, through God’s grace, the way in which God loves his creation.

3. They will also mirror the way in which Jesus loves the Church, and sacrifices Himself for her. In them, the love of God will be immanent and immediate within the family that are the fruit and blessing of marriage. As a reflection of God’s love, their union and the unity that flows from this are indissoluble. It is of divine origin, and can never be broken. Through this union, God is made known and experienced in the heart of the family. Each family is called to be a domestic church, so that the Church, in her turn, can become a family.

VIGIL MASS OF PENTECOST: C

30.05.04 Jn 7, 37-39

1. The Jewish feasts formed the backdrop for the public ministry and teaching of the "Word made flesh" (Jn 1, 14). The Feast of Tabernacles or Tents commemorated the Wandering in the Desert of the People of Israel, when they lived a nomadic life in tents. The Tent of Meeting outside the Israelite camp became the place where the Divine Presence dwelt (Ex 40, 34-38). The events of God's saving action during the Wandering were re-presented in ritual fashion in the Feast of Tabernacles. Those celebrating the feast must renew their dedication to God. The rituals make actual the saving events they recall and demand a decision.

2. On the last day of the Feast - the seventh day, cleansing waters were allowed to flow in abundance through the courts of the Temple in Jerusalem, since the Temple was the replacement for the Tent of Meeting after the time of King Solomon. This purifying action would have been witnessed by thousands of Jews in the Holy City for the Feast. The liturgy included prayers for rain, rites that commemorated the Mosaic water miracle (Ex 17, 1-7), and readings from biblical passages foretelling life-giving water for Zion (Zc 14, 8; Ez 47, 1f). The drama of the spectacle was overwhelming, as Jesus stood up to make his cry.

3. The gift of the Holy Spirit fulfils the Jewish ritual perfectly. Just as Jesus compared the Temple to his own body (Jn 2, 19-22), so the waters that flow through the Temple will bring cleansing and abundant life to the heart of the believer, by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. So too will the Spirit animate and perfect the Church, which is the Body of Christ and the community of all believers, with living waters from an inexhaustible stream. Pentecost is usually symbolized by fire, but for John the Evangelist water effectively conveys the universal purifying powers and fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit.

SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY TRINITY: C

06.06.04 Jn 16, 12-15

1. Contemplation of the Blessed Trinity is not an intellectual exercise in John's writing, though it is the deepest of all Christian Mysteries celebrated in that Catholic gospel. This does not mean that the doctrine defies rational enquiry, as if our minds were something independent of God, but rather that so sublime a teaching goes so much further and deeper than the most brilliant speculations of human thinking. Jesus reveals the Father as a lived experience, and bequeaths the Spirit in joyful contemplation of the fullness of the truth about to reach man (Jn 16, 13). Life will be breathed into the human spirit.

2. These things are readily available and accessible to the simplest of believers, whose hearts and wills are turned toward God. By revealing the hidden depths of

the mystery of Jesus, the Spirit makes his glory known. Jesus, in his turn, manifests the glory of the Father (Jn 17,4), from whom comes everything that he possesses (Jn 3, 35; 5, 22.26; 13, 3; 17, 2). The Father is the source of the revelation communicated by the Son and brought to completion by the Spirit, who in this way glorifies both Son and Father. There are not three revelations, but one. God is revealed as a dynamic communion of loving in one nature.

3. We are all called to share in this dynamic loving at the living core of the Godhead. This is pure gift, with absolutely no element of deserving on the part of mankind. St Peter talks of us being co-sharers of the divine nature (2Pet 1, 4), which means that Christians are not just called to be near God or with Him, but to be as He is in all eternity. There can be no greater blessing, nor more sublime a vocation. None would dare claim it, had it not been revealed to us through the Prince of the Apostles by God Himself.

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: C

13.06.04 Lk 7, 36-8, 3

1. "Speak, Master" (Lk 7, 40). If only each one of us could start our prayers with the words of Simon the Pharisee, then we might stand a chance of converting and having our sins forgiven. For we, too, might receive a lesson worth hearing, might have our faults corrected and our complacency challenged. We do not understand this story at all if we dismiss the attitude of this good Pharisee out of hand. Jesus was on good terms with him (Lk 7, 40), accepting invitations to his house (Lk 7, 36) and drawing him along the narrow path that leads to God's kingdom. Jesus corrects those he loves.

2. Which one of us has not had his heart clouded with judgment, usually prejudice, against a neighbour who has fallen? We drink in a tabloid culture of condemnation, and readily take our place at the table of a society which permits everything and forgives nothing. Simon the Pharisee is a spiritual master compared to us: we would do well to sit at his feet and learn as he had to learn - sharp and humiliating to our puffed up pride though the lessons of Christ are. Yet Our Lord is not angry, even if he is insistent: we need to listen.

3. Redemption rings in the changes to a sinful life. Through the forgiveness of God, won for us on Calvary by one like us in all things but sin, that which previously conspired to bring us down is given the power to transform our lives to the greater glory of God. The woman with a bad name in the town sold a parody of love for money. Through some unknown conversion experience, she is absolved of her sins and introduced to the true meaning of what she sought for in vain previously in the love of God made known in Jesus.

TWELFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: C

20.06.04 Lk 9, 18-24

1. The cross at the heart of human existence guarantees life in abundance. This is the cross of the God-man, Jesus, and no other. Only the suffering of Jesus can save us, because in Jesus the power of God reconciling the world to himself is made known in human form. Divine life flows through human nature, transforming it from within and making it fit for heaven. It is the touch of the divine that wreaks this change in us, so the acknowledging of the divinity of Christ by Peter opens the disciples up to the possibility of redemption and the Passion.

2. Conventional wisdom is turned on its head in this initial prophecy of the Passion. We cannot have an attitude to life if we do not have an attitude to death. Otherwise we travel through life failing to deal with an unknown fear, mastered and unfree. Jesus tells us that life in him is the only mark of eternity. Leaving behind selfish attempts to build personal empires and attaching ourselves to Christ leads to the only true life: "For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, that man will save it" (Lk 9, 24).

3. The Passion of Christ is the ultimate test for the disciples. Luke builds up the drama of his gospel narrative in this chapter to the point where Jesus sets his face like flint towards Jerusalem (Lk 9, 51). This will be his last journey, and his disciples need to be prepared for the trauma to come. Two prophecies of the Passion (Lk 9, 22; 43-45) and the setting down of the conditions for the following of Christ (Lk 9, 23-26) all emphasize the importance of the cross. In between, Luke's account of the Transfiguration (Lk 9, 28-36) seeks to reassure his key followers and prepare them for the scandal of Christ's bloody crucifixion.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: C

27.06.04 Lk 9, 51-62

1. The legacy of the bloody history of Israel acutely effected Jesus on his journey up to Jerusalem. After the reign of Solomon from 950BC, the kingdom established by David, his father, was split into Judah - the southern kingdom around the Holy City - and Israel - the northern kingdom comprising the territories of the remaining ten tribes of Israel. The northern kingdom was annihilated by the Assyrians from 720BC, when the ten tribes were deported to other Assyrian territories. Other non-Israelite peoples were moved into the territory of the former northern kingdom. These were the pagan forefathers of the Samaritans.

2. Emnity between foreign Samaritans and Jews, who prided themselves on being the inheritors of the promises made to their father, David (2Sam 7, 1ff), was founded on a lasting horror among the Chosen People at what had happened to the lost ten tribes. Samaritans adapted old Israelite worship and built a rival Temple on Mount Gerazim, later destroyed by the Jews in 129BC (cf Jn 4, 20). Their ancestry and their worship was despised as corrupt. No-one but Jesus in the group traveling to Jerusalem would have been disturbed by James and John's request: "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to burn them up?" (Lk 9, 54).

3. In fact, it was normal for Jews to be thrown out of Samaritan towns if it became known they were heading up to Jerusalem. The alternative route meant crossing over to the east bank of the Jordan and following it south until Jews were able to re-cross the river near Jericho. Then there was the dangerous climb up to Jerusalem. Following Jesus on this journey would have required endurance. It is clear that Our Lord is more determined than ever before: "Once the hand is laid on the plough, no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven".