

6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)

GOD HAS NO FAVOURITES

“In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears Him and acts uprightly is acceptable to Him,”. Peter said this because of his background as a Jew who thought that it was only Jews who were going to be saved. The descent of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius and his household (Gentiles) changed his idea about God, and who will be saved.

This message from Peter tells us a lot about Who God is; that God knows and loves every one equally. He has no favourites. In His sermon on the mount, Jesus taught the disciples that God loves every body, both righteous and sinners, because “He causes His sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike,” (Mt. 5:45).

St. Paul told the Galatians that we are all children of God. “For all of you are children of God, through faith in Christ Jesus, since very one of you that has been baptized has been clothed in Christ. There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither slave nor freeman, there can be neither male nor female - for you are all one in Christ Jesus,” (Gal. 3:26-28). Is that how I think?

These messages tell us that God loves us and we are to love Him and love one another. It is through love that God sent His Son to take away our sins. As the second reading says: “everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God”. Again, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus said that it is by loving every one including our enemies that we become children of God. He said, “You have heard how it was said, You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; so that you may be children of your Father in heaven,” (Mt. 5:43-45a). Can I say with confidence that I am the child of God, considering what is required of me?

Jesus loves us but He does not chain us to His love. We can opt out of it; and we do that when we break His commandments, or refuse to obey His commandments. We often think that obeying the commandments stifles our peace and joy, but Christ Jesus tells us that if we obey His commandments and remain in His love we shall have His joy and our joy will be complete. Many things bring us joy but they do not last; it is the joy that comes from the

Holy Spirit that lasts. Things done in the name of the Lord with a sincere heart and mind bring complete joy.

Remaining in the love of Christ also involves loving one another. And He tells us that, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friend". He Himself has set an example for us by dying on the cross to save us. We have become His friends, and so He has shown us His love by dying a shameful death to set us free from the evil one.

Each one of us here has been chosen by Him to show love. He has no favourites. So He wants us not to have favourites. We should love the tall and the short, the male and the female, the black and the white, the brown and the red, the rich and the poor, the well and the sick, the physically and mentally challenged, as well as the physically and mentally strong. Loving everybody is not optional but obligatory or a command; "This I command you: love one another," He said. St. Paul also told the Romans; "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the Law. Love can cause no harm to your neighbour, and so love is the fulfilment of the Law," (Rom. 13:8&10).

It is very difficult now to love as we should, because of the strict observance of the law in our society today. The observance of the law now can be likened to the time of the Pharisees and Scribes. We are not guided by love to observe the law, but we obey by the letter. When something happens, the first question asked is "what does the law say"? It is difficult to draw one's attention to a wrongdoing. Is it love to be quiet when I can help someone to know the truth even if it is not pleasant to him or her?

How are we laying down our lives for others in our marriages, work places, schools, shops, entertainment arenas, and sporting activities? Love takes away fear and brings joy and security. God has no favourites. He loves you and me equally. He wants to save me and you. He wants each one of us to experience His love by obeying His commands, which is to love one another; and then we will share in His joy, and our joy will be complete. The only tag He wants me to wear is love; and to fear His name.

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER
AM I BEARING FRUIT?

What is the fruit that I have to bear? Trees bear all kinds of fruit that human beings and animals feed on. The trees do not enjoy their own produce. The fruit we have to bear is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is bearing the fruit of the Spirit that we give glory to God and we become disciples of Christ. Jesus uses the vine to teach us how important it is for us to remain in Him and keep His commandments.

Jesus tells us that He is the vine and we are the branches. It is when we remain in Him that we shall bear much fruit. And every branch is supposed to bear fruit, because without bearing fruit we cannot remain on the stem; we are cut and thrown out and wither. There is no excuse of not bearing fruit because He has pruned us by giving us His word. We have been grafted on to Him through our faith in Him.

The first and foremost way to bear fruit is to love in deed and in truth, not in word or speech. "It is not anyone who says to me ,Lord, Lord, who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven," says the Lord; (Mt. 7:21). We are to obey His commandments and do what pleases Him.

John tells us that "if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God and receive whatever we ask, because we keep His commandment and do what pleases Him". What does my heart tell me now? Is it condemning me or I am free of any guilt-feeling?

In the first reading, Barnabas shows how to love in deed. He defended Saul and took him to the apostles. Barnabas (originally known as Joseph) was a man of encouragement, and in many ways he showed his love for the believers. He sold the piece of land he owned and brought the money and presented it to the apostles. (Acts 4:36-37). He loved in deed and in truth, and he was a true disciple of Christ. He bore fruit, and through his good deeds, he gave glory to God.

Being branches also means that there should be a bond of unity not only with Jesus but also among the believers. Not all the branches grow from the main stem. Most of them grow from other branches and they are supported by the base branch, and continues to the main stem. This is how we are in Christ, the true vine. To show love is to serve the person we know and meet every day. When Saul was accepted, and later was threatened by the Hellenists, the believers together sent him away to a safe place. They saw the need to support him because they realized that he shared with them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Later in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul asked the believers to live in unity; he wrote to them saying, "With all humility and gentleness, and with patience, support each other in love. Take every care to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one Body, one Spirit, just as one hope is the goal of your calling by God," (Eph. 4:2-4).

I have been grafted onto Jesus through my faith and baptism; am I bearing fruit? What kind of life am I living which is a sign of giving glory to the Lord? Am I clean by God's word or I have not allowed myself to be pruned, and so I am bearing sour grapes? Am I a parasite on the tree or am I a branch bearing fruit for the good of all? Will I be cut and burnt?

To know whether I am bearing fruit or not is first to examine myself to know how strong my relationship with Jesus is. Do I have a personal and close relationship with Him that enables me to ask whatever I want with the strong

hope that it will be done for me? Do I keep His word in my heart day and night?

Moreover, I have to find out how I belong to the community of believers, and how I am promoting unity and love. Saul was accepted to the community of believers based on his state of life at that time, that he was then controlled by the Holy Spirit. The apostles and the other believers did not drive him away because he was persecuting them, but accepted him because he was a changed person. Is it the same among us? We meet every day as Catholics, but it is very difficult to let go our hurts and grievances. It is difficult for us to promote peace. We are afraid of being belittled.

To be certain that I am bearing good fruit is to look at the fruit of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control," (Gal. 5:22-23). I may have the gifts and do all kinds of things but if I do not manifest any or all of these, then my Christian way of life is questionable; then I am not giving glory to God. St. Paul advises us with these words to the Galatians; "Since we are living by the Spirit, let our behaviour be guided by the Spirit and let us not be conceited or provocative and envious of one another," (Gal. 5:25-26). Our ultimate goal of being Christians is to bear fruit and give glory to God. Is that my main aim?

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

IT IS BETTER TO TAKE REFUGE IN THE LORD THAN TO TRUST IN MEN

The Psalmist tells us that it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man; and it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes. Why is he saying that? The answer is given in the readings we just heard.

In answering the elders and the scribes about how the cripple was healed, Peter told them that it was in the name of Jesus. He continued to say that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved". Before then Peter had said to the cripple, "I have neither silver nor gold, but I will give you what I have: in

the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, walk!” (Acts 3:6), and he got up to walk.

St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians, also tells us about the importance of the name of Jesus. He said, “He (Jesus) humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross. And for this God raised Him high, and gave Him the name which is above all other names; so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld should bend the knee at the name of Jesus,” (Phil. 2:7-10).

In the gospel, we heard Jesus saying that He is the good shepherd, and He lays down His life for His sheep. This Sunday is known as the Good Shepherd Sunday, stressing how Jesus knows us and cares for us, His sheep. He confirms what the Psalmist is saying that it is better to take refuge in Him. Because Jesus as a good shepherd never abandons His flock when there is danger as the one hired would do.

As a good shepherd, He takes His sheep to green pastures and still waters, as He fed the five thousand men in the desert. When there was danger on the sea, He calmed the raging winds, (Mk. 4:35-39). He rescued His disciples on the sea; people who were fishermen and had had many experiences on the sea. So it is in Jesus that we can find protection.

In addition to all He has done and continues to do, He has made us God’s children, and we shall be like Him one day. That is why it is very important to remain in Him and take refuge in Him. He is going to give us everlasting life. But unless we take refuge in Him and do what He tells us to do, it is not possible to be like Him and we shall not see Him as He is, as the third verse of the passage says: “Everyone who has this hope based on Him makes Himself pure as He is pure,” (1Jn. 3:3). So those who are outside the fold who listens to His voice are brought to the fold and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

We put our trust in people and in material things, but very often they disappoint and fail us. I have experienced this many times. It happened during my seminary formation, and also after my ordination. I know many of us here have had many experiences of disappointments and failures from relatives and friends. We stock-pile material things like the rich man whose harvest yielded plenty, rejoiced and told his soul to eat and drink without thinking about the one who has control over his soul, and the salvation of his soul; he was told that that very night he would die, (Lk. 12:16-21).

We put our trust in our intelligence and wisdom, but they are inefficient. The wisdom given by Christ to the apostles through the Holy Spirit was too strong for the scribes and the elders to comprehend. The Sanhedrin had power over the people, but they could not withstand the power of the name of Jesus proclaimed by the apostles by which the cripple was healed.

John, in the second reading, tells us that we are the children of God, and indeed we are through our baptism by which we share in the death and resurrection of Christ. Children run to their parents when they sense danger; they approach them when hungry or in need of something. Is it the same with us who are re-born and made God's children? Our way of worship and our belief in God are like staging a play or playing a role in a movie. They do not have much impact on our lives.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is our rock, our refuge, and our stronghold; He protects those who take refuge in Him; He gives food to those who are hungry, and drink to those who are thirsty. He gives wisdom to the simple; He heals the broken-hearted, and comforts the sorrowful. All those who are among His flock and those who are outside the fold who are ready to listen to His voice will be called children of God. Today if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.

3RD SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)

THE CHRISTIAN AS A WITNESS OF CHRIST

When Jesus rose from the dead, He appeared to His disciples several times, assuring them that He still loved them. He also made them aware that indeed he had risen with the human body, and not a ghost. He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and all that the Law and the Prophets spoke about Him. Then He told them they were witnesses. Before He ascended into heaven, he told them to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the Holy Spirit who would help them to be His witnesses. He said; “You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit which will come on you, and then you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to the end of the earth,” (Acts 1:8).

Today we hear St. Peter bearing witness to Christ that He is the Righteous One, and the Author of life. St. John is also saying the same thing that Jesus Christ is the Righteous One, who is our Advocate. They were witnesses because they saw Him, walked with Him, touched Him, and ate with Him, and they had faith in Him, empowered by the Holy Spirit. “Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands, the Word of life - this is our theme. That life was made visible, we saw it and are giving our testimony,” (1Jn. 1:1-2a).

Their witnessing went beyond just proclaiming the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They witnessed by the way they lived their lives with those who believed their message. “The whole group of believers was united heart and soul; no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, as everything they owned was held in common. The apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power, and they were all accorded great respect. None of their members was ever in want,” (Acts 4:32-34); Each day, with one heart, they regularly went to the Temple but met

in their homes for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and they were looked up to by everyone,” Acts 2:46-47). That was the new life in the Spirit. They lived as the Easter people, filled with joy and gladness amidst persecutions from the elders and scribes.

How can a christian of today be a witness of Christ since he has not had the same experience as the apostles had? Even though we have not seen Jesus as the apostles did, we have had some share of the experiences in different ways. We have the Eucharist; He has left us His commandments, and above all we have received the Holy Spirit as they did. However, our ability to be witnesses depends on the faith we have in what we read from the Scriptures. So there is the need for conversion of heart, repentance from our sins, and live a new life through the power of the Holy Spirit which we have received. John assures us that we have an Advocate in heaven interceding for us at the right hand of God. This should give us confidence that our efforts to repent will yield good fruits. It is also to bring us joy that we shall have a share in the everlasting happiness in the kingdom of God.

Do we have witnesses in the Church? Who are they and where are they? We cannot point to any one or look for one any where. You and I are supposed to be witnesses of Christ. His address, “you are my witnesses”, includes you and me. But have we even crossed the first line of conversion and repentance? Many of us are lukewarm Catholics; we are neither hot nor cold, and since we are neither hot nor cold God will spit us out His mouth; (Rev. 3:15-16). Many of us are not keen about living our Christian lives in such a way that we become witnesses for those around us to know what Christ has done.

We are to witness by the way we gather every Sunday or weekday and break bread together like the early believers. It seems that even our welcoming at the beginning of mass is a big problem for some of us. It is difficult for us to reach out to others. Gathering as a community for other functions other than celebrating mass is another way of testifying to Christ that we believe in Him.

Our conversations with people, and our interactions with those who are not Christians, or Catholics should let them realize that we are resurrected people. Christ has brought us hope of eternal life so every day we should have in mind to live a repentant life, a sign that we are ready to be His witnesses.