

Homily for Monday, 15 May 2017 - Monday of the Fifth Week of Easter (Sajnos, nincs magyar fordítás!)

(Acts 14:5-18; Jn 14:21-26) The pagans of Lystra had never seen anything like it. They were dumbfounded when Saint Paul cured a man who was lame from birth. They got one thing right: this was a divine manifestation. But from there, things go downhill quickly. They tried to make sense of this divine manifestation based on their own pagan preconceptions. Not only were they wrong about the meaning of Paul's miracle, their conclusion missed the mark by 180 degrees. Instead of tangible proof against idolatry, they presumed that the miracle was proof positive in its favor. They thought Paul and Barnabas were gods come down from heaven in human form. They even identified Barnabas as Jupiter and Paul as Mercury. So much for theory, but the crowd's concrete plan of action was no better. They wanted to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. These two apostles would have none of this. They quickly intervened to set things straight. The inhabitants of Lystra must turn from idols to the one, true God, who made heaven and earth.

This teaching, however, could give rise to a scandal. Upon hearing it, the pagans might wonder why neither they nor their fathers had ever heard anything about this one true God? Why had God abandoned them altogether? Paul framed his answer to this objection in simple ideas to suit his audience. You see, Lystra was a colony founded in 6 BC by Roman soldiers so Paul is speaking here to uneducated folk. He starts by noting that God allowed the Gentiles to go their own way. In other words, God didn't abandon their ancestors. They abandoned God. Paul quickly adds that despite this disobedience, God had continually blessed the pagans with rain and fruitful harvests. Later, in Athens, the seat of philosophy, when refuting this same objection, Paul would have loftier answers. He noted that in Athens there was an altar to the unknown god. So the door to right worship hadn't been completely shut on the pagans after all. There still was a way to worship the true God, albeit implicitly. Paul said that men could grope after God and perhaps find him. This was undoubtedly a reference to philosophical inquiry. Then Paul mentions another way to God when he says that God isn't far from any of us. "In him we live and move and have our being," (Acts 17:28a) as even some of their poets had said. St. Paul is speaking here about God's mysterious but real presence in every man and woman.

Today's gospel is taken from the Last Supper. Jesus has just told His apostles that He is leaving them. Peter insisted on following Him, but Jesus responded by foretelling Peter's denial. The apostles were stunned. Again, there was danger of scandal. Again, the issue at hand was God's supposed abandonment of His flock. As if this weren't enough, the apostles were also perplexed because the Messiah was supposed to manifest himself publicly to the world. Jesus, however, was talking about manifesting Himself privately to individuals – to those who kept His commandments. To them alone, would He give proof positive that He is Lord and Messiah. The Father and the Son would come to every faithful soul and make their dwelling with it. This is a new indwelling of God within man, an indwelling of the Blessed Trinity which immeasurably surpasses the divine indwelling that Paul spoke about at Athens. In order to experience this indwelling we must first remain in the state of grace by keeping the commandments. Sanctifying grace is Jesus' pledge never to abandon us! If we are meticulously faithful to this pledge, then His assistance to us will be nothing less than supernatural. [Amen!] Let me explain! Hang on because we're going to sum up spiritual theology in three paragraphs!

When someone turning from sin, resolutely commits himself to keeping the commandments, he usually experiences tremendous joy. This joy, however, is not the definitive manifestation that Jesus spoke about in today's gospel. When this same soul resolutely renounces mediocrity as well as sin, it enters upon what spiritual masters call the active night of sense. (Active means we are at work, passive means God is at work.) Provided this soul is faithful to its resolution, Jesus' second manifestation will be announced by what spiritual masters call the passive night of sense. Only souls fervent in mortifying themselves experience this divine manifestation, but when they do, they often fail to recognize it for what it is. They try to interpret it according to their own preconceived ideas. Their conclusions often miss the mark by 180 degrees. Before this, loss of fervor had always been due to their own fault, their own dissipation or self-indulgence. But they've given up all that. They don't realize that the aridity they now experience in prayer is different. It is from God. Indeed, they might even mistake it for a diabolical attack.

The honeymoon in their spiritual life is over. Now, true love is being purified of self-love. Instead of retreating, the faithful soul is really making tremendous progress. If he only perseveres, his crisis will be resolved beyond all his expectations. Our Lord's crucifixion represented just such a crisis in the lives of the apostles. Then were their illusions concerning the Messiah's earthly empire smashed to pieces. This crisis, however, ended when the risen Lord manifested Himself to them. They, for their part, rejoiced in Him much more than they had ever rejoiced in their Lord before His crucifixion. This wasn't the visceral joy they had experienced in former days. It was a peace beyond anything they had ever experienced. To recap, something like this can also happen to us if we are meticulous about keeping the Lord's commandments, about mortifying ourselves and about praying. Then, there will come a crisis of aridity – the passive night of the sense. But it will end when Jesus manifests Himself to us again a new way, a new form of prayer, a budding mysticism. Then will He prove to us that He is Lord. Jesus will grant to our souls a much greater peace than we ever knew in the days of our spiritual honeymoon.

When, besides mortifying our desires, we start practicing the theological virtues of faith, hope and love with real heroism, we will thereby enter upon a second night, which the spiritual masters call the active night of the spirit. If we remain steadfast in our resolve, our generous efforts will provoke another crisis in the spiritual life called the passive night of the spirit. Spiritual masters liken this to a spiritual purgatory. Something like this crisis happened in the lives of the apostles when even the risen Lord was taken from them. They once more felt utterly abandoned by God. They were at a loss for what to do. The angels told them to await the coming of the Holy Spirit. Instead of returning to their former occupations, during this new crisis, they responded with heroic faith – they prayed constantly with Mary. (This reminds us of the invaluable part the Holy Rosary plays in our spiritual life.) When the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles at Pentecost, their crisis came to an end. So great was their joy that men mistook them for drunkards! They started celebrating the sacraments and suddenly Jesus manifested Himself to them again – this time definitively, at least for us wayfarers – under the appearances of bread and wine. Upon the cross, Jesus hid His divinity. Now even His humanity lay hidden. When something like this happens to us in our spiritual lives, like the apostles on Pentecost, we too will be ready to live and die for Christ. So be it! Amen!