

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER B/2006

After the resurrection of Jesus, the task of the apostles was to bear witness to this great event by explaining to the Jewish people what happened and what the resurrection meant for them. This is what Peter does in the 1st reading we have heard. First of all, he shows them that there is not a discontinuity between the God of Jesus and the God in whom they believe. So he presents Jesus' resurrection as the work of the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their fathers. More than that, Jesus' death and resurrection is the fulfillment of the prophecies announced by the prophets. He shows also very clearly the identity of Jesus as God and man.

In this perspective, Jesus is not like any other Jews; on the contrary, he is the Holy and the Righteous One, the Author of life. The aim pursued with this enumeration is to make the people understand how wrong they were to deliver Jesus and to ask the release of a murderer, Barabbas. What to do then? The simple thing to do is to repent and to change the style of life in receiving the remission of sins in the name of Jesus.

The message of conversion is also the content of the second reading. St John affirms clearly that if we come to sin, we have the assurance that we can be forgiven. This forgiveness lies in the expiation of sins obtained in the death and the resurrection of Jesus, because it is for our sake and for the whole world that He has died on the cross. To be truthful to Jesus means to keep His commandments. None can say he knows and loves Him without keeping the commandments, otherwise he is misleading himself; he is a liar. In other words, our faith in God has to be manifested more through our lives than simply by our words. Is not what people do more important than what they say?

However, we know by human experience that, in spite of our good will, things do not always turn out right; time and time again we fall into sin. Can God still forgive us? Yes, because His mercy is immeasurable, it goes beyond our merits and what we truly deserve. While we are comforted by such an assurance of God's mercy, we are, at the same time, called to recognize our frailty, to count on Him and to strive to become better and better. That is the reason why St John presents Jesus as our Advocate before the Father.

In a modern term, I would say Christ is our Attorney before the Father. As we all know, the role of an Attorney is to defend the accused and to do any thing he can to obtain his acquittal, what ever be the crime. As our Attorney, Christ, sits with the Father at the court of the Most High, how wonderful it is that our case is easy, that He will win our case and clear us! Such a statement gives courage and hope to understand that there is no desperate or impossible case before Jesus.

As a matter of fact, nobody has the right to say he will never be forgiven for the wrong he has done in the past or now. Even if our fellow human beings or society will find it difficult to forgive us, God will. Nobody has the right to say that it is too late for him. Only mercy and forgiveness lie or exist before God. Thus, only a few things are needed, namely to recognize the sins, to ask forgiveness and to change the style of life. Is that beyond us? Is that beyond you? No. With the grace God gives in the resurrection of his Son, the Lord Jesus, we can do it; you can do it.

Now, what is the resurrection from the dead? The Gospel of Luke gives us some insights to grasp a little bit what it means. First of all, what strikes most is the fact that when the Risen Christ appears to somebody, He is never immediately recognized. For example, Mary takes Him for the gardener, the Emmaus disciples see in Him a traveler; the apostles think He is a ghost; Peter, out fishing on the Lake of Tiberias, thinks He is a fisherman, etc... Why is it so? Why does some hesitation and even doubt persist? In my view, the Evangelists would like to tell us that the apostles found it difficult not only to understand what the resurrection was, but also to believe it. Their faith developed slowly and uneasily.

It is true that Christ himself manifested to them, and with many wonderful signs proved that He had entered into his Father's glory, but it took time before the apostles could accept the new reality. Their faith and ours, of course, is not the result of material proof. The resurrection cannot be approached scientifically and so is not a reality that belongs to this world. Faith is not a surrender to evidence; it is a free answer to a call; it is an opening of the heart to the word of God. The fact that there are atheists proves that God acts gently, does not impose, and uses no violence.

The spiritual journey of the apostles toward faith is the image of what each one of us has to go through. We too pass through many doubts, uncertainties, hesitations and fears before we can "see" the Risen Lord (differently but not less really). Every time we gather together in prayer, every time we listen to His word, He is among us. Every time we leave Him a little bit of space in our hearts and in our lives, we start understanding better what we have not understood for many years. Little by little our eyes open up, our knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures becomes sharp and our lives start taking a turning point towards God. Finally, we discover that He has always been with us throughout all the shadows of our life, taking us by hand and guiding us in the decisive moments.

Let me finish by talking about the striking fact of the physical experience of the Risen Christ as attested by the Gospel of this Sunday: "Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have. (...) They gave him a piece of baked fish; he took it and ate it in front of them". Why all this insistence? The Evangelist would like to tell us that the resurrection has changed of course the life of Christ, but He is the same Jesus the disciples used to touch and eat with. The life of Jesus on earth has not been just a simple parenthesis or interlude. Although the Risen Jesus shares from now on into the life of Father's glory, He is ever marked by what He has lived during his thirty years on earth. The shared friendship, the created human bonds, woven over the years, is not just rubbed out. These bonds remain forever, and that is our Hope. The resurrection does not wipe out what we are, but transfigures our being, giving it the plenitude of its meaning. We too, like the disciples, can deepen here on earth our relationship with Jesus in listening to His word and sharing his body and blood in the Eucharist. This friendship will never pass because Christ will share with us His life forever. God bless you.



Homily Date: April 30, 2006
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Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20060430homily.pdf