

2 Easter-April 11, 2010

Homily

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love.

So here we have in today's Gospel the familiar story of doubting Thomas. Thomas was one of the apostles, and as we know was intimately involved in the life of Jesus Christ. He was a witness to many events in the miraculous ministry of Jesus. In other words he was really part of the inner circle or rather a close associate of Jesus in his ministry.

Thomas is not mentioned in the Gospels as being present in the resurrection narratives as set forth in the Gospels. However one would think that since Thomas was privy to so much of what Jesus said and did that the miracle of Jesus' resurrection from the dead should not be incomprehensible to him. However, we do know from the gospel reading that Thomas had to find some way to satisfy himself that Jesus did in fact, return to earth in a human body.

Nevertheless, we do have what could be considered typical of many of us here today. And that is that the death and resurrection of Jesus is foundational to our faith, and yet we know that aside from a confession of faith, the resurrection defies all logic.

What may not be apparent from the Gospel narratives is that Thomas was really concerned to maintain a continuing relationship with Jesus although it would take on a different form.

Thomas wrote a document (at least one attributed to him) in approximately the year 62 AD called the Gospel of Thomas. This Gospel never made it into the canons of the New Testament. This Gospel was unearthed in 1945 in the Egyptian desert. It is not a Gospel which takes on a story narrative like the gospels we know, rather it is an unorganized list of 114 “sayings”.

The thrust of the sayings and object of the Gospel is that the kingdom of God already exists in and around us and is only waiting for our transformed minds to accept this concept. An example is saying 113 that the kingdom is here and now and people must learn to discern it rather than waiting for some cosmic miracle to bring the Kingdom down to earth. Saying 113 states: “They asked him: When is the Kingdom coming? He replied: It is not coming in an easy observable manner. People will be saying “Look it’s over here” or “Look, it’s over there”. Rather the Kingdom of the Father is already spread out on the earth and people aren’t aware of it”.

There is a humorous story about witnessing to the risen Christ. It’s an old story. I was reminded of this story in an E-mail I recently received from one of our parishioners who shall remain nameless (to spare the guilty).

As the story goes a Pentecostal Minister was busy baptizing some of his flock in the river. A man who obviously was “socially lubricated” (he was drunk) was wobbling along the river bank and comes upon the scene and then pauses to look at what is going on. The minister spots him and confronts the man: “**have you seen Jesus Christ?**” The man is somewhat bewildered and doesn’t reply. The minister is caught up in the moment so he drags the guy into the river, dunks his

head in the water. Pulls his head up and asks him again: “**have you seen Jesus Christ?**” The poor fellow doesn’t know what to make of all this. The minister is not about to give up so he dunks him again, pulls him up and asks the same question again: “**have you seen Jesus Christ?**” By this time the poor guy is almost overcome; however his reply was not satisfactory so down he goes for the third time-only this time is much longer! When the minister pulls his head out of the water he again asks the same question: “**Have you seen Jesus Christ?**” Finally the man turns to the minister and says in a slurred voice: **Are you sure this is where he fell in?**

I think both of these stories, the story of Thomas and of the poor guy that got caught up in religious zeal, speak to the need of the faithful to be able to somehow identify in a more corporeal, a more tangible way, with the person of Jesus Christ.

William James, a philosopher (as well as a Medical Doctor) wrote a classic book entitled “The Varieties of Religious Experience”. This book was published in 1902 and is frequently cited in many scholarly circles. The book is a collection of religious experiences based on studies and interviews conducted by James in which he interviewed people from all walks of life.

Just to put the concept of his book in perspective I quote what he says about religious experience (p19). “There can be no doubt that as a matter of fact a religious life, exclusively pursued, does tend to make the person exceptional and eccentric. I speak not now of your ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional of his country whether it is Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition,

determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. It would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life. We must make search for the original experiences then we can only find in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever..." In other words, is there any "fire in the belly" so to speak which is the result of our personal religious beliefs and convictions?

I would like to put a theological twist on the story of the poor guy at the river. First of all the man was "socially lubricated" he was in no shape to comprehend much of anything. However, the minister was so caught up and indoctrinated in his theology that he truthfully believed that a liturgical action (Baptism) was all that was required to make Jesus Christ relevant to this unsuspecting soul.

Now obviously any minister worth his salt would know better but this story does echo what William James says when some forms of religion come by way of **fixed forms of imitation** and **communicated by tradition**. Just saying something doesn't make it so.

Lest I be criticized for bashing organized religion, let me be perfectly clear that the church as I understand it, and I believe, is that it is instituted by Christ as a community of faith and for all that it implies. We gain strength from each other, we support each other. And we also are made aware of the saving grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ through word and sacraments Many of us are familiar with the adage "He has no hands but ours".

Now, since I used a humorous story to make a point. I would like to impose on the story a more pastoral **Christian** approach to this scenario.

I submit to you would it not be best to allow the inebriated man (assuming he had a drinking problem) to be guided into a recovery program. A program which is anchored in faith in a supreme being. A program such which is experiential in the sense that recovery is a one-on-one personal experience with a loving God who can accomplish much more than mere mortals? I know some of you can relate to the model to which I refer. There are many ways to develop the “acute fever” that William James mentions.

In the Gospel reading for today the apostles gather twice behind locked doors. I think this is a significant item since Jesus appears to the group in spite of locks on the doors. So the question I would posit today is what barriers, real or imagined, are obstacles to developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? What locks do we create which prevent us from full human development which prevent Jesus from a more active participation in our daily lives?

To paraphrase Fr. Burton’s sermon last Sunday—Easter Sunday: Life is messy but there has to be a pony in that pile of manure!

And as the Gospel of Thomas says: “The Kingdom of the Father is already spread out on the earth and people aren’t aware of it”.

And has the apostle Paul writes in his second letter to the church in Corinth (5:7):” ..we walk by faith and not by sight”.

Amen

R.E. Studley

