Sixth Sunday of Easter **Year A**

Acts 8: 5-8,14-17
Ps 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20
I Pet 3: 15-18
John 14: 15-21

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The story is told of a parish priest who was hospitalized. The head of the parish council went to visit him. "Father," he said, "our parish council passed a special resolution wishing you a speedy recovery. Six were for it, five were against, and nine were undecided."

I'm reminded of this story today because of today's gospel. In the one brief reading Jesus says twice that if we love him we will keep his commandments.

What commandments? We live in a world where pretty much anything goes. Actively homosexual bishops? Same-sex marriages? Abortion? Six for, five against, nine undecided. Politicians get their convictions from opinion polls. The tendency is to pick and choose, even among believers in Christ. We call it Cafeteria Christianity.

Ronald Knox was an Anglican who became a Catholic priest. He once remarked that the weather vanes on the steeples of some of the churches were very appropriate, since the teachings of those churches change according to how the wind is blowing at the time. The Ten Commandments have become the Ten Suggestions.

I think this is why Pope John Paul II was so admired by the young: He had a direction in which he was going. He was like a migratory bird heading for a distant destination. He had a goal – which was to show his love for Christ by how he lived – and no headwind or bad weather could blow him off course. Young people were drawn to John Paul like slivers of metal to a magnet, despite the fact that their sexual life styles were often in open contradiction to his teaching. We admire people with convictions, with goals, people who know where they're going.

Have you ever seen homing pigeons released from cages far from home? At first they circle around a bit to get their bearings, but once they do, their instinct for home is sure.

I think this is what today's scripture readings are encouraging us to do: to circle around today's gospel till we get our bearings, and then head off with a more definite direction to our lives. Once the migratory bird gets its bearings, it's in for a tough life. There will be headwinds, long sessions over water, hunger, weariness – but always they're buoyed up by hope, by living life with a purpose. It's this *hope*, having a goal and hoping to attain it, that makes us resemble Christ.

That's why in the second reading today St. Paul says, "Reverence Christ in your hearts. And should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, always be ready to reply, but speak with courtesy and respect." As you know, here in Kloof, it's fashionable to be a Christian just now. In fact, it's fashionable to be a *fashionable* Christian just now. Kids at school, and others too, question our beliefs.

And we should be able to reply not only with courtesy and respect, but also with confidence, because of the hope that is in us.

And where does this hope come from? If a migratory bird alighted for a brief rest on a church steeple next to a weather-cock, the weather-cock might say to it, "Cockle – a – doodle – do and who are you?" And when the migratory bird replied with courtesy and respect, "I'm a Catholic migratory bird on my way home," the questions would start: "Why all the effort? Look at me. I'm attached to this church, so I don't have to fly anywhere to be at home. Why don't you join me, save yourself a lot of effort?" And the bird would reply, "Indeed, whoever made you did a wonderful job. You have a beautiful profile. But aren't you just a little bit one-dimensional? Birds are meant to fly."

Then the weather-cock might say, "You Catholic birds are always flying against the wind: do this, don't do that. Look at me. I change with the wind. I'm up-to-date. I'm today. You Catholics are so yesterday." And the migratory bird might reply, "When you're on a journey you live in hope. If anything, I'm so tomorrow."

Birds don't sing because they have a message in their minds. They sing because they have a song in their hearts. And what is the song in our hearts? When Jesus says in today's gospel that if we love him, we will keep his commandments, he is *not* saying, "*If* you keep the commandments, I will love you." He is saying, "Keep the commandments *because* I love you.' We don't keep his commandments *so* he will love us, but *because* he loves us. *That* is the song in our hearts. His commandments are the instinctual navigation aids that guide migratory birds unerringly to where they've never been, to a home they long for but have never seen.

Mothers and fathers are like God in this respect. Parents give dos and don'ts to their children *because* they love them, not in order to make them lovable. I will never forget a distraught father whose daughter had left him to join the Moonies. "I'd give my right arm to have her back," he cried, and I knew he really meant it. The anguish in his voice will live in me forever. That's the way God the Father feels about each one of us. Indeed, he gave the very life of his only Son so we would come home to him. That's why in today's second reading St. Peter says; "Christ died for us….so that he could lead us (back) to God."

What, then, *are* the commandments that show our love for God? What does Jesus himself say? Let's start with a few on the *don'ts*.

Do not return evil for evil. That's what turning the other cheek really means: returning good for bad.

Do not judge your neighbour. Leave judgment to God. He knows all the facts. You do not.

Do not worry about food and drink and clothing, as if these were the most important things in life. Your Father in heaven knows you need all these things. Trust him to take care of you.

Do not store up treasures for yourself here on earth. The only riches waiting for you in heaven are the things you entrust to the poor.

Do not look back once you have put your hand to the plough. Once you have decided to follow Jesus, keep going forward, always hoping in God. You can stumble, you can fall, but get up again and keep going.

Then there are the *do's*:

Do forgive those who sin against you. Be merciful as your father in heaven is merciful.

Do love one another as I have loved you. I love you just as you are, unconditionally and without any 'if you do this' conditions at all.

Do take this bread and eat it. Take this cup and drink it. Do this in memory of me; in other words, remembering that I died for you, so that you might live for me.

Do live your life for others, not for yourself. If you lose your life for others, you will save it. If you save your life for yourself, you will lose it.

Do good. Don't be content with avoiding evil. Visit the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked.

(This entire list of do's and don'ts is heavily indebted to Flor McCarthy, New Sunday and Holy Day Liturgies, Year A, pp 132-3)

Well, these are some of the more important commandments. They are not the 10 Commandments, but if you count them, there are ten, ten direction signs that Jesus himself stressed

At this point, you may be saying to yourself, "Great, but how do I go about it? Frankly the Ten Commandments sound a lot easier." And it is here that Jesus comes to the rescue. Listen to what he says in today's gospel:

> "I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate (the Holy Spirit) to be with you forever…. He is with you, he is in you. I will not leave you orphans. I will come back to you….. On that day you will understand that I am in the Father and you are in me and I am in you."

And a few lines later Jesus adds, "Anyone who loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him and make our home in him."

What Jesus is saying here is that he and his Father and the Holy Spirit will be not only *for* us but also *with* us on our journey. He will be our inner navigational system on our journey. Just as the migratory birds have an inborn instinct to guide them to their unseen destination, so do we.

Like homing pigeons we have been circling around these truths for the past ten minutes or so. Unlike the parish council, which was undecided about wishing the pastor well, God is totally for us: 3 for, none against, no undecided. Now it is time to head for home, remembering that migratory birds always fly together in flocks. Let's be on our way in trust and hope, knowing we are loved.