

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Year A

Acts 1:12-14
Ps 27:1, 4, 7-8
I Peter 4:13-16
John 17:1-11a

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During the past month, we have witnessed coverage of our faith on prime time TV with round the clock coverage on CNN and Fox leading up to the election of Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI. After years of being pounded by the press because of the sexual misconduct of clergy crisis, the sensitivity and enthusiastic coverage by the media have been a welcome respite. The timing could not be better. Have you noticed the subtle shift in our readings from the first four Sundays in Easter which focus on the resurrection of Jesus through the empty tomb stories and the appearance stories to the early life of the Church as its members transitioned from life with the risen Lord to life with the ascended Lord who now sits at the right hand of the Father as stated in the Creed? Christ must now be experienced first and foremost in the members of his body, the Church. True, he is connected with the members as their head, but his presence is mediated primarily through the Word and sacrament along with the loving acts of the members. All of this is indispensable without the Church.

The first reading from Acts sets the stage for the life of the Church. Jesus has been taken up to heaven and we are left with a community of flesh and blood men and women who are named for us. The apostles stand out in a preeminent way as the leaders of this group being charged to make sure the group stays faithful to Jesus and his teaching. The names are ordinary names: Peter and John, James and Andrew, among others. None of them were particularly famous or wealthy or powerful at the time. This is one of the four times we come across such lists of the twelve in the New Testament. We may be sad by the omission of Judas since that is a constant reminder that any one of us can drift from Jesus. It is very hard for many of the men and women of our age to believe that Jesus really entrusted his message to flesh and blood human beings. One often hears the cry: "Yes, I believe in Jesus but not the Church"; or "Yes, I'm interested in God and the spiritual life but not in institutional forms of religion." No doubt, this is in large part due to the narrow mindedness and hypocrisy of so many members of the Church that prompted John Paul II to organize a day of repentance in March 2000 where the pope surrounded by thirty cardinals and 200 bishops all dressed in purple vestments to symbolize Penance begged forgiveness of the world for the sins committed by "the sons and daughter of the Church" down through the centuries. The list as you know is an embarrassment: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the treatment of science and gifted scientists and theologians, the divisions among Christians, anti-Semitism, etc. In our own time we could add the sins of intolerance, religious indifference, secularism, consumerism at the price of feeding the hungry, deceptions, abuse of power, ethical relativism and violations of the culture of life. Do our neighbors and children sometimes see us as lukewarm, preaching one thing but doing another?

I believe that the defining element of Christianity is its attitude toward suffering. Christianity is not ashamed of suffering much less does it attempt to sugar coat it. Jesus teaches us not to seek it but rather not to be surprised by it and never to fear it. One of the previous pope's most poignant messages to young people was "Do not be afraid!!" Perhaps more than any other message, this fundamental reassurance won the hearts of young people all over the world who are plagued by insecurity about their future. Will they succeed? Will they get ahead? Will they avoid the trap of addiction and the lure of quick sexual gratification to be discarded quickly when someone better looking or younger comes along? Are there any real truths that are reliable and worth basing your life upon?

Suffering is simply unavoidable in our world from the moment of birth until our taking leave. The Christian message is not that it is avoidable much less that it can be anesthetized but rather that it can be transforming. It can lead to new life, new possibilities, new love, new hope. Every one of us who chooses to take seriously the teaching of Jesus will suffer some loss. We cannot simply live our lives like unbelievers who perhaps live for the greatest power, freedom and pleasure that we can grab at the moment. If we are believers, we cannot simply go along with the choices of today's powerful and beautiful who fill the pages of every issue of "People" magazine.

The only joy that can satisfy us and sustain us is joy that is lasting, joy that cannot be taken from us. John's Gospel makes clear to us that such joy can only be found through Jesus. This prayer which John allows us to eavesdrop on is sometimes called the high priestly prayer of Jesus prayed at the very moment when he was about to enter into his passion and death, Jesus is confident that regardless of the evil doings of man, God will vindicate him. Evil will not have the last word. We too can arrive at that same security and confidence of Jesus "by accomplishing the work that the Father gives us to do." Much of that work can seem mundane and rather tedious. Sometimes it involves denying certain pleasures or curbing certain desires, very rarely will it involve taking a stand that requires great courage and risks losing something precious.

As we await the celebration of Pentecost, let us commit ourselves to Christ's church led by flesh and blood human beings who in some mysterious way manage to keep us in touch with the living risen Christ who alone is the way and the truth and the life.