

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Year B

Acts 1:15-17, 20a, 20c-26

Ps 103:1-2, 11-12, 19-20

I Jn 4:11-16

Jn 17:11b-19

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Twice as many people in the world: the population of our Earth has doubled since the early '60's – within the lifetimes of most of us here. How many people have walked on this earth since the human race began?

But how many of these people have passed by, unknown to most of the world? How few among them have left a mark that we can point to? Left a trace behind them in the history of earth?

None has passed through this life unnoticed by God – and no one has passed through life without some effect on the human race, on the world. But how many are there whose life still attracts our attention? How many still capture the imaginations of people today? How many of all these past inhabitants of earth still catch our eye?

How many, for example, could you make a hit movie about?

Well, there's definitely one. Two years ago – remember? – Hollywood gave us *The Passion of the Christ*. Forty years ago it was *The Gospel according to St Matthew*. Fifty years ago *The Robe*. Almost thirty years ago a very different movie, not very reverent at all – something about somebody named Brian. And there was another movie, more serious, but pretty far removed from reality, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. And do you remember the live productions, *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*?

And *Son of Man*, from 35 years ago, and *The Day Christ Died*, a movie from 25 years ago – and *The Miracle Maker*, from five years ago. What about Zeffirelli's movie *Jesus of Nazareth*? And *The Greatest Story Ever Told*? And *The King of Kings* – one version from the '20's and one from the '60's – remember those? There was even a production from 1898, *Jesus before Pilate*. And still more and more films about the life and death of Jesus Christ since movie-making began.

In every one of those movies – even the most absurd – there are grains of truth – tiny ones sometimes. But, yes, there was a Christ who died on the cross, even if his last thoughts weren't the ones some film suggested.

And in every one of those movies, even the best – even one like *The Passion of the Christ* which tried to show everything as truly as human research and intelligence could allow for – even that movie had to resort to conjecture – because we don't have any camcorder tapes from 2000 years ago. Just think of the blockbuster movie *Titanic*, a tremendously well covered news story from less than a hundred years ago: a lot of conjecture in that movie – and a lot of out-and-out fiction.

It's no surprise that movies which deal with Jesus Christ have a lot of conjecture and much fiction in them.

What really is mind-boggling, though – what really stretches our thinking – is that dozens of movies – plus books and stories and musicals and plays – still, after 2000 years, find it worthwhile – popular, even – to tell and retell, over and over, with conjecture and imagination, fact and fiction, that incomparable story of Jesus of Nazareth and the world-changing event of his death and resurrection. Our minds – and I think, our hearts – hunger to know details of his life, details which the Gospel writers thought were not important for the great Good News they were proclaiming about Jesus, the Son of God.

For this one extraordinary Person, we wonder, don't we, what it was like for, say, the other children of Nazareth to grow up with Jesus. We can find in the Gospels, also, some insight into the final thoughts of the earthly Jesus and he died on the cross – but we yearn to know more, and our imaginations conjecture what other thoughts he might have had. Recent books explore what his life would have been

like during the Holy Family's sojourn in Egypt. Recent TV shows latch onto much earlier writings – well after the New Testament, but ancient indeed – and try to imagine details about the Apostles that the New Testament passes over. We wonder what happened to the risen Jesus' burial shroud – or his seamless robe – or the nails of his cross.

Jesus – in spite of some silly things said by some rock star whose name I can't remember – surely seems to be of enduring interest to a lot of people. Yes, I think indeed it is the “greatest story ever told”... – but it also seems to be the most frequent story ever told.

The Apostles were right, then; they grasped – or God's Spirit grasped for them and, because they were open to the Spirit, they followed the Spirit's urgings – they grasped that they had to find another witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They had to choose – or better, they had to let God choose a replacement for one who had left their number. They had to.

I can't imagine they had, back then, a detailed understanding of what would happen to the story of Christ now in our lifetimes, but I'm sure they knew – maybe better than we do – how easy it would be to make up untrue but interesting bits of biography and so lead people down a false path.

No wonder Peter said we need to replace that one witness, that one very central and official witness who had left – and we need it to be someone “who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us” into heaven.

In the days since then, it's happened even that people who wanted to stress the divinity of Christ, people who wanted to emphasize – as many of the New Testament writings do – that Jesus went freely to his death and willingly gave himself for us – people eager to give witness to those truths also began to tell stories about Jesus that his first disciples knew to be untrue. There were stories, for example, about the child Jesus exercising divine power while playing with his friends – long before his hour had come (as St John says) and before the human Jesus grew in wisdom and grace (as St Luke puts it). But these stories didn't ring true to those who really knew Jesus, and so his long-time friends and followers recognized them as false.

In our own days we've now heard in the news and on TV another account of Jesus' life and death, an account that Jesus' followers long ago recognized as false. Much of that story seems to want us to really be convinced that Jesus went freely into the death that redeems us. But to serve that end, it makes up stories that Jesus' early disciples knew to be untrue.

It's sometimes a delight to let our minds take us back to those days, and to imagine what walking with Jesus through Judea and Galilee was like. What did he do and say, beyond the sometimes too sparse facts the scriptures give us? What would we have seen and heard, journeying with him to Nazareth and Capernaum? What would it have been like to be, say, the Apostle James? Or John? Or Martha, or Mary?

St Ignatius of Loyola encourages us to meditate like that. Romano Guardini, Bishop Fulton Sheen and Jim Bishop wrote wonderful books to explore that. Taylor Caldwell has written historical fiction on St Luke and St Paul, and then, almost thirty years ago, on Judas and some “gospel” ascribed to him, but dating from several centuries later.

Yes, Peter and the others among the Eleven knew well that their own solid witness to Jesus and to his death and resurrection could be put to the test. They said it right, People start with Jesus, and then “turn... away to go to [their] own place.”

So they added another to their number, one who had been with them since the beginning, one who saw and heard Jesus the Christ – one who knew him and believed in him and so could be a real witness. “And the lot fell upon Matthias, and he was counted with the eleven apostles,” to bring their number back to the Twelve that Jesus had intended, to be a faithful witness to the end, “consecrated in the truth” of Christ the Son of God.