

Holy Ghost

Sunday Readings

Scripture Study

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Cycle B
May 17, 2009

Holy Ghost Catholic Church
Knoxville, Tennessee

Opening Prayer

Lord,
You have made Your salvation known to us
and poured out Your Holy Spirit upon us;
may we prove that we have been begotten of You
by living in Your love, and loving one another
as You commanded us.

Amen

First Reading

Acts 10:25-26, 34-35, 44-49

²⁵ When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, paid him homage. ²⁶ Peter, however, raised him up, saying, "Get up. I myself am also a human being."

³⁴ Then Peter proceeded to speak and said, "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. ³⁵ Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, ⁴⁶ for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, ⁴⁷ "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit even as we have?" ⁴⁸ He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. ⁴⁹ Then they invited him to stay for a few days.

The simple greeting found in 10:25-26 marked a turning point in the early Church. Usually, so-called "righteous" Gentiles like Cornelius, who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, visited and supported Jewish establishments. But the sense of separation many Jews had did not allow reciprocal visits. Jews were to remain segregated from the "nations" to maintain religious purity. To enter the house of a non-Jew not only meant

the visitors were unclean, they were polluted by the presence of foreign cultures and their strange gods.

Luke presents the Cornelius episode as the decisive step in the launching of the Gentile mission. Its decisiveness is emphasized by the length and detail of the narrative in chapter 10, of which today's reading forms the closing part, by the repetition of the story in full when Peter reports back to the Jerusalem church in chapter 11, and by Peter's reference to the episode at the apostolic council in chapter 15.

One striking feature of the story is that the Holy Spirit falls upon Cornelius and his companions *before* they are baptized. Usually, both in Acts and in the New Testament generally, the Spirit descends after baptism, with or without the laying on of hands. Luke's point is that the Spirit here takes a fresh initiative where the Church was too timid to follow. Hence, this episode has been aptly called the "Pentecost of the Gentiles."

Acts 10:34-35 is close to Romans 2:10-16. God is not an unjust judge. He will not favor an unjust Jew over a just Gentile, but in every nation the one who fears God and acts uprightly is acceptable to God (10:35).

The Acts 10 outpouring of the spirit on the Gentiles strictly parallels the first Pentecost in Acts 2. The Jews with Peter are amazed that Gentiles received the same gift of the Spirit as they. The pagans also speak in tongues and tell of God's wonders, as the Apostles had. The difference is the first Pentecost for the 120 mentioned no water baptism. Everyone after the 120 who received the Spirit were also baptized with water as a reception into the church (10:47-48). God, however, had again taken the initiative. No one baptized uncircumcised pagans until God showed by the visible sign of tongues that He had already given them the Holy Spirit.

1. What would you say is the most important truth we can absorb from this reading?
2. Some of Jesus' first followers found it hard to accept into the Church those who were not Jews. Why do you think some people tend to reject any newcomers?

Second Reading

1 John 4:7-10

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.⁸ Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love.⁹ In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him.¹⁰ In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.

We can safely say that the writer of this letter has love on his mind. In fact, he used the word in one form or another ten times. What he wants all of Jesus' followers to be absolutely certain of in their hearts is that God is love. And before we ever thought of loving God, He loved us first. It is His love in us that we share with one another.

John makes the necessary connection between authentic human love and divine love (verses 7-8).

God has afforded this experience of love to every human person in the gift of Jesus, sent into the world to embrace and redeem mankind through His saving death (verses 9-10). Not only does the author affirm that love is *of* God, or better, *from* God (verse 7), he goes even further to state: God is love! (verse 8). As Father Raymond E. Brown has noted (The Epistles of John, Volume 20, The Anchor Bible), this shift in formation (seen also in 1:5: "God is light" and 1:6 "God is in light") warns us that we are not dealing with precise definitions of God but with descriptions of God in relation to human beings.

There are three pivotal points of Christian revelation inherent in this short selection from First John. The first is that God is a God of love. In the history of human thought and human religious experience, people have looked on God in many different ways. Some have seen Him as the benevolent clock maker who wound things up and walked away, leaving creation to unwind according to the plan He set for it, but not taking any day to day interest in it in the meantime.

Some have seen God as the fierce warlord who will lead His people to victory over their enemies provided they have made appropriate sacrifices to keep him happy.

Some, closer to home, have seen God as the book-keeper who keeps careful watch on us, scrupulously noting down all our good and bad deeds so that He can close out our account quickly and efficiently when we finally stand before Him in judgement.

The real God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, isn't like any of that. He is a loving Father Who cares

for His creatures, Who invites them to be like Him, Who goes to great – some say ridiculous – lengths to insure their eternal happiness in His company.

The second pivotal point of Christian revelation presented in this Sunday's reading is that God has intervened in human history. At a certain specific point in time, God determined to clean up the mess that human beings had made of the world He had given them. He came into their midst in the person of God the Son Who became a specific human being and lived in a specific place and spoke specific words and experienced certain specific events in His lifetime. Jesus is not some faceless everyman, an abstraction based on philosophical speculation about human nature or about God. Jesus is a real, distinct, one of a kind human being Who entered human history as an expression of God's love to carry out a clearly defined mission of salvation.

These two truths of revelation are among the most fundamental realities that distinguish Christian belief from every other religious faith, every other religious philosophy. Belief in and commitment to a loving and a saving God, a God Who became and remains part of human history, are essential components of the Christian faith.

The third pivotal point of Christian belief (and Christian life) that this reading provides is something that bears frequent repetition. It is a consequence of God's love and God's project of salvation. Our love *for* God, our service *of* God, our obedience *to* God are not ways of compelling some positive response *from* God, but themselves derive from the action that God has already taken on our behalf. In sending His Son to be our redeemer, our loving Father has taken the initiative. Anything that the most godly and most generous of us can offer Him is a response, an answer to God's prior undertaking. The gift of ourselves that we offer to God and the sharing of ourselves that we offer to our brothers and sisters are all derived from God's previous gift of Himself to us. "This is love: not that we have loved God, but that He has loved us." Any approach to God that does not take that into account is simply erroneous.

The familiar and oft-repeated phrase "God is love" (verse 8) in its context here communicates three things: that God has an only beloved Son; that God freely willed to share this Son even to the point of death; that God did this for the forgiveness of our sins that we might have life through Jesus' salvific deed.

1. How many specific truths about love can you identify? Which one is most important to you?
2. Think of as many endings to this statement as you can in one minute: Love means ...
3. What are the signs of God's love in our parish?

Gospel

John 15:9-17

⁹ As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. ¹¹ "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. ¹² This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ It was not you who chose me, but I Who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. ¹⁷ This I command you: love one another.

This passage is a continuation of last Sunday's gospel of the vine and the branches. That metaphor described how believers "remain" in Jesus – a theme this Sunday's gospel continues to develop.

At first glance we might think that "love" is the term that expresses a personal and intimate relationship. But in the Old Testament "love" is standard terminology used to describe the loyalty that partners in a covenant owe one another. In turn, love/loyalty is measured by the lesser partner in the covenant obeying the commands of the partner; in other words, to love is to be loyal, and to be loyal is to obey.

The gospel is explicit about the connection between commandment, love, and obedience: "This is my commandment, love one another ... [and] do what I command you."

Paul reminds us that love is patience and kindness. It lets go of jealousy, conceit, and resentment. It delights in the truth. It trusts. It hopes. It endures. All of these qualities of love are attributes of God's love for us. What is more, love's greatest expression – to lay down one's life for one's friends – is what the Passion means.

What is the cost of love? When we frame love in this question, the subject transcends the feeling. No longer does love remain in the realm of the heart. It becomes a decision of the will. The question implies that we do not truly love unless we are willing to act upon our feelings and live with the consequences. Love may not be love without an inner emotion, but it cannot survive without action. And it cannot grow without testing.

To claim love is easy, to live love is difficult. Yet, in Jesus, we find the example of love perfectly lived out.

We also find the power to live love to the fullest. These passages continue Jesus' speech to His followers at the Last Supper. Just as Jesus stressed intimacy in the vine and branches analogy last week, here Jesus focused upon the means of intimacy: love. To live out God's love meant care for others. When one truly loved God, he or she was raised to the status of God's friend.

Jesus gave the status of "friend" to His followers as a gift in two ways. First, Jesus made His followers His friends through His revelation. Just as the true friend "knew his brother," Jesus allowed His followers to "know" Him and His Father through His teaching, His ministry, and His life among them.

Second, Jesus "chose" His "friends." They did not choose Him. He chose His followers for a mission: to "lay down" their lives as He did, so their self giving might produce lasting "fruit."

How does one rest in Christ's love? Keep His commands. Obedience is the key to "remaining" in Christ's love (as well as building up a community based upon charity).

Jesus did not mean these passages for his follower's comfort. He used the passages to challenge his disciples. In the culture of Jesus' time, status and reputation stood above accomplishment. It did not matter what someone did. What others said about him did matter. If someone did engage in activity, his efforts were only meant for self-glorification. Through the eyes of many Jews, God blessed His faithful with economic abundance, natural ability, and impeccable reputation. The poor, the lame, and the sinner were to be shamed and avoided.

This description might be over-simplified and almost a caricature, but it does point out an immature spirituality that existed in the time of Jesus, as well as today. The words of Jesus challenged the notions of blessing some followers had. Jesus never said, "Blessed are the rich and self-important who stand over you with spiritual advice." He did say, "Love one another." Love did not mean a warm, comforting feeling. It meant to help others in need. In other words, Jesus turned the conventional wisdom upside down. Action ("love" as serving those in need) stood above status and reputation. In fact, such action was the key to a growing relationship with God.

1. What is the difference between joy and happiness?
2. List some ways "laying down one's life for one's friends" can be accomplished in family and community life.
3. Which people do you find most difficult to notice and be concerned about?

This Week's Saints

John I, pope

May 18
(d. 526)

Pope John I inherited the Arian heresy, which denied the divinity of Christ. Italy had been ruled for 30 years by an emperor who espoused the heresy, though he treated the empire's Catholics with toleration. His policy changed at about the time the young John was elected pope.

When the eastern emperor began imposing severe measures on the Arians of his area, the western emperor forced John to head a delegation to the East to soften the measures against the heretics..

On his way home, John was imprisoned when he reached Ravenna because the emperor suspected a conspiracy against his throne. Shortly after his imprisonment, John died, apparently from the treatment he had received.

St. Bernardine of Siena

May 20
(1380-1444)

At 22, Bernardine entered the Franciscan Order and was ordained two years later. For almost a dozen years he lived in solitude and prayer, but his gifts ultimately caused him to be sent to preach. He always traveled on foot, sometimes speaking for hours in one place, then doing the same in another town.

Especially known for his devotion to the Holy Name of Jesus, Bernardine devised a symbol – IHS, the first three letters of the name of Jesus in Greek, in Gothic letters on a blazing sun. This was to displace the superstitious symbols of the day. The devotion spread, and the symbol began to appear in churches, homes and public buildings. Opposition arose from those who thought it a dangerous innovation. Three attempts were made to have the pope take action against him, but Bernardine's holiness, orthodoxy and intelligence were evidence of his faithfulness.

Rita of Cascia

(1381-1457)
May 22

Like Elizabeth Ann Seton, Rita of Cascia was a wife, mother, widow and member of a religious community.

Her holiness was reflected in each phase of her life.

Rita wanted to become a nun but was pressured at a young age into marrying a harsh and cruel man. During her 18-year marriage, she bore and raised two sons. After her husband was killed in a brawl and her sons had died, Rita tried to join the Augustinian nuns in Cascia. Unsuccessful at first because she was a widow, Rita eventually succeeded.

Over the years, her austerity, prayerfulness and charity became legendary. When she developed wounds on her forehead, people quickly associated them with the wounds from Christ's crown of thorns. She meditated frequently on Christ's passion.

Catechism Theme: God's providence (CCC 306-308)

Jesus chose his followers to carry out God's plan of salvation. He chooses us today to do the same. By allowing us to participate, He gives us a personal stake in the coming Kingdom. "God ...enables men to be intelligent and free causes in order to complete the work of creation, to perfect its harmony for their own good and that of their neighbors...they then fully become "God's fellow workers" and co-workers for His kingdom." (CCC 307) Love is the best way to become His "co-worker," since it reveals the reason He made the cosmos to others and affirms our friendship with the Creator.

Closing Prayer

Lord God,
out of Your great love for this world,
You reconciled earth to Heaven,
through your only-begotten Son.

Grant that we,
turned aside from love for one another
by the darkness of our sins,
may, by Your light shed into our souls,
be filled with Your own tenderness.

May we embrace our friends in you,
and our enemies for Your sake,
in bonds of mutual affection. Amen.
