

APRIL 22, 2012: THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER  
 Acts 3:13-15, 17-19 I John 2:1-5a Luke 24:35-48

Perhaps the first verse in today's gospel is the most important verse in all three readings. "The two disciples recounted what had taken place on the way, and how Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of bread." As Catholics, we spend a lot of effort and time making certain we recognize Jesus in the bread. I don't know that we worry much about recognizing Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

I learned to "say Mass" during a unique period in church history: the fall of 1964. The Vatican II liturgical reforms were to take effect in the United States on the First Sunday of Advent, two weeks before my ordination. But they weren't to be implemented in Italy - where I was living - until the First Sunday of Lent. (The "authorities" wouldn't even allow us to integrate English into our ordination ceremony.) Really a confusing time.

The priest preparing us to preside at Eucharists, P. Francis Murphy, was able to help us cut through the confusion. "Your job as presiders," the future auxiliary bishop of Baltimore informed us, "is to help create a community out of all those participating in the Eucharist." We weren't just to get all the words "right," or make certain they were accompanied by the correct gestures. Our role was to help form the Body of Christ in such a way that all those present could recognize that Body in this specific community. Like the two disciples in the inn at Emmaus, we were all expected to recognize the risen Jesus in the "breaking of the bread," not just in the bread.

It doesn't take a lot of dying to self for most people to recognize Jesus in the bread and wine. It's simply a matter of agreeing to do so, to eventually admit there's something more here than just bread and wine. But it always takes a death to recognize that same Jesus in those around us - especially if some of us are Republicans and Democrats. In the second half of I Corinthians 11, Paul goes into great detail about the problems some Eucharistic communities have in recognizing that body. It's no accident that, here in Luke, the risen Jesus first shows his startled followers his hands and feet: outward signs that death is an integral part of new life.

It's also no accident that today's first two readings revolve around conversion and forgiveness. Peter assures the crowd in our Acts passage that if they "repent... and be converted, (their) sins will be wiped away." The author of I John tries to convince his readers that, even if they sin, "(Jesus) is expiation for (those) sins, ... and for those of the whole world."

But how did the earliest followers of Jesus go about getting their sins forgiven? Long before formal "confession" came on the scene, Christians believed most sins could be forgiven simply by participating in the Eucharist. (Matthew's Jesus says this expressly during that gospel's Last Supper narrative.)

Those who died enough to recognize the Body of Christ in themselves and in the community became new creations because of that death. Such dying is part of the repentance both Jesus (in the gospels) and Peter (in Acts) encourage people to experience: a complete change of one's value system, a new way of looking at people and situations. Those who achieve such a transformation don't have to worry about "confessing." Because they've died to themselves, they're no longer the people who committed those sins. That "old person" died in becoming and recognizing the Body of Christ during his or her participation in the Lord's Supper.

Quite a task (and honor) for Eucharistic presiders! It was a lot easier when all we had to do was say the right words and make the correct gestures.

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## APRIL 29, 2012: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 4:8-12 I John 3:1-2 John 10:11-18

One of Rudolph Bultmann's best known quotes is his statement, "After Jesus' death and resurrection, the preacher became the preached." We have an example of this process in today's gospel pericope.

Accustomed to picturing Jesus as the "Good Shepherd," it's easy to forget he originally didn't apply that image to himself. We know from Matthew and Luke that he first employed shepherd metaphors to defend his concern for sinners. "If you shepherds can be preoccupied with one lost sheep, why can't I be preoccupied with sinners?" He was a carpenter, not a shepherd.

But, by the time John writes - in the mid-90s - Jesus is the shepherd. What he once preached, he has become.

"I am the good shepherd," he proclaims. "A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep-----I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." Scholars presume the risen Jesus is making these claims, not the historical Jesus; the Jesus alive and working in the community for whom John writes. That Jesus has become more than just a preacher of faith; he's now at the center of faith.

We also see that same process at work in today's other two readings. Notice, in our Acts passage, how Jesus himself - not just his preaching - is at the center of Peter's defense. The man he cured was made whole "... in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene.... There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved." The preachers in Acts are preaching Jesus, not just the message Jesus preached.

The author of I John asks us to go one step further. Not only is Jesus important; those who imitate him share in that importance. We, like him, have become "children of God." And that importance is not only for this world. It gets better in the future. "What we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." One day we also shall be preached!

Yet there are certain things which have to be accomplished before that day arrives. John's Jesus refers to one of those things. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd." Accomplishing unity among Christians is, and has been a daunting task.

Though the splits and divisions which originated in the Reformation are still fresh in our historical minds, and evident in the day by day living of our Christian faith, there never has been a period in our 2,000 year history in which all followers of Jesus have been completely one. Many of Paul's letters highlight the mid-first century divisions between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and the late-first century letters of John presume huge theological chasms are separating some Christian communities from others. As regards unity, our church has never had any "good old days" about which we can reminisce and imitate. There have always been those "other sheep."

That's why John always puts the person of Jesus at the center of our faith. Nothing or no one else can unite us. It's Jesus whom we imitate, Jesus whom we preach. Though many Christian churches can boast of a long tradition of heroic actions and deep faith, if our faith and actions aren't rooted in the risen Jesus among us, those actions and faith will simply and certainly lead to more divisions among us.

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