

## APRIL 26, 2015: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

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

Today's reading from I John contains one of the most important and best-known lines in Scripture: "Beloved, we are God's children now; 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."

Just what does it mean to be "like him?"

As God's children now, and having a promise of being more like him/her in the future, what can we expect? What should we be striving to become? Though I presume no one has a precise idea of what such divine similarity entails, today's two other readings might provide us with some hints.

Both Luke and John the Evangelist take for granted that Jesus of Nazareth is God's child par excellence. So by reflecting on the special titles they give to that special child, we might understand something of what's expected of us as God's children.

In our Acts pericope, Peter defends his cure of the crippled beggar by telling his accusers that he's simply continuing the ministry of Jesus our savior. Often we think that salvation only revolves around someday getting to heaven. Though that's a significant part of biblical salvation, it's only a part. Our Christian sacred authors presumed Jesus is saving us right here and now, long before we enter the pearly gates. In this case, Peter, as another Christ, saves the beggar by releasing him from the paralysis which completely controls his life.

If we're committed to becoming saving co-workers with Jesus, God's child, then we're also committed to helping remove the paralysis which stops people from being the individuals God wishes them to be. If Jesus is a savior in those situations, then we must also try to be saviors in parallel situations.

Today we're more conscious than in the past of types of paralysis which go far beyond the physical. We know that psychological paralysis is often more painful and debilitating than bodily paralysis. Just the simple act of forgiving others the pain they've caused in our life can help remove the pain and paralysis that our unforgiveness causes in their life. The daily anxiety which many feel because they're "different" from the rest of us, can easily force them to be psychologically immobile. They regress into themselves, afraid to let others know who they really are. A saving word or a welcoming smile of acceptance from us can often break the chains which tie them down.

Perhaps that's why the consoling image of Jesus the good shepherd quickly became so popular among his early followers. It frequently appears in the writings of the "Fathers," and often is depicted in catacomb art. John's Jesus assures us we're following behind someone who not only knows us, but is willing to lay down his life for us; certainly something which we who imitate this unique child of God should also be willing to do for those around us.

Yet we should never overlook that part of today's gospel which speaks about Jesus being constantly on the outlook for "other sheep that do not belong to this fold." Though we find great security in being part of a specific Christian community, there should always be a certain unease in that security. There's always those "out there" who would give anything to be part of our flock. A big piece of their salvation right here and now could revolve around our welcoming them into our communities right here and now, no matter the cost to us.

Sounds great to hear ourselves called children of God, but that title comes with certain implications, implications which surface when we hear some of the other titles God's unique child has acquired.

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## MAY 3, 2015: FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 9:26-31 I John 3:18-24 John 15:1-8

In my experience, I suspect many of us take more pride in being members of the institutional church than we do in being members of the Body of Christ. Though our early Christian authors believed some form of a structured community was necessary for the Body of Christ, they always put the emphasis where it should be. This seems to be the basis for today's second and third readings.

John's Jesus constantly emphasizes the relationship he expects his followers to have with him. The image of the vine and branches conveys that relationship in classic terms. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who remain in me and I in them will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing." On the other hand, "Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither . . ." Our relationship with the risen Jesus couldn't be expressed in clearer terms.

The only problem is that we frequently overlook the part about being pruned. Even those branches of the vine of Christ that bear fruit will be pruned ". . . so that they bear more fruit." In other words, our vine/branches connection with Jesus causes us to experience the same pain and pruning which he endured; a pruning which eventually leads to life.

Yet, as we hear in our Acts passage, that pruning could at times come from our relation with the institution. The newly-converted Saul quickly discovered this. "When (he) arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple." Obviously Paul would like to become part of the Jesus movement, but those who were part of that movement before him are suspicious not only about his claims of conversion but also about his motives in joining them.

Though Barnabas eventually vouches for him, Paul's habit of dueling with Hellenist Jews creates problems for the rest of the church. They feel much more comfortable shipping him back to his hometown of Tarsus than in having him evangelize in Jerusalem. It must have been quite painful for this newly appointed Apostle to the Gentiles to be sent so far away from the action. Thankfully he retained his relationship with the risen Jesus in the midst of this pruning, else he wouldn't have been ready when the institution eventually discovered how badly it needed him.

The author of I John, normally no friend of a rigid church institution, also stresses the importance of that relationship. According to this writer, we don't keep God's commandments because we want to get into heaven, but because it's the one sure way of staying connected to the risen Jesus. "Those who keep his commandments," he writes, "remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us." Other Christs are far less concerned with "word and speech" than they are with "deed and truth."

Our sacred authors take for granted that our relationship with Jesus isn't just a once a lifetime experience. Like all relationships, it either grows or dies. That's why our deeds and the truth are so important. Unless we're constantly building that relationship through those two means, we'll be watching it disappear before our "faithless" eyes.

Though the institutional church is important, many of us forget why it exists. According to its theologians and Scripture scholars, its main mission is to help us build a relationship with Jesus, not with itself. Unless we keep reminding it – and ourselves – of that mission, it could easily become an obstacle and not a means to achieving that goal.

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