

MAY 15, 2011: FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 2:14a, 36-41 1 Peter 2:20b-25 John 10:1-10

Today's gospel passage provides us with a classic example of the dramatic shift in emphasis which took place after Jesus' death and resurrection. The late Rudolph Bultmann pointed out this phenomenon almost 100 years ago: "After Jesus died and rose, the preacher became the preached."

We know from the Synoptic gospels that one way Jesus defended his habit of associating with sinners was to remind his detractors that even they go after the lost: women stop their housework to search for a lost coin; shepherds walk away from their flocks to pursue a lost sheep. But at no point in these gospels did he refer to himself as the "good woman" or the "good shepherd." He simply employed images with which others could identify to fend off criticism about his going after lost sinners.

John is the evangelist who actually alters one of Jesus' examples, not only identifying him with an ideal shepherd, but also expanding the metaphor by having Jesus go beyond just searching for the lost, pointing out how Jesus, the good shepherd cares for the entire flock. "Whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep ... The sheep hear his voice, as the shepherd calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... He walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice."

John eventually changes the whole metaphor and makes Jesus the gate for the sheep. "Whoever enters through me will be saved, and come in and go out and find pasture — I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." What the historical Jesus once preached about, the risen Jesus has now become.

The early church made Jesus, not just his message, the center of their faith. The author of 1 Peter shows us the end result of this process. "He (Jesus) bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls." We're not just expected to follow the things Jesus taught, we're expected to follow Jesus himself.

That explains why, in our first reading, Peter's response to the crowd's question "What are we to do, my brothers?" is so significant. He ends his Pentecost sermon with the simple response, "Repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

As we've seen before, biblical repentance demands a complete change of one's value system. What was once important in our lives is now insignificant; what was once on the periphery of our lives is now dead center. Repentance implies a 180 degree change in how we look at reality.

The early Christian outward sign of that turnabout was their baptism in the name of Jesus the Christ. In other words, they had not only committed themselves to carry on the ministry of Jesus, they had now become other Christs. That's why they could be certain their sins had been forgiven in baptism. Each had morphed into a different person because of the sacrament. He or she was no longer the individual who had committed those sins. They had acquired the personality of Jesus of Nazareth, someone who was without sin.

Many scholars believe that, as a man, this carpenter from Capernaum who went town to town preaching the good news might not have understood all the implications of that preaching for himself. Thankfully his first disciples, after his resurrection, opened the door to some of those implications for us.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

**MAY 22,2011: FIFTH SUNDAY OF
EASTER Acts 6:1-7 1 Peter 2:4-9 John
14:1-12**

In his latest book, *The Social Mission of the U. S. Catholic Church*, Fr. Charles Curran makes an interesting observation: "The Catholic approach to theology is characterized by "both-and" approaches rather than "either-or" approaches." Fortunately, this is frequently the way our sacred authors deal with the issues in which they're involved. Problems arise when we make an either-or out of a both-and. This is especially the case when we look at the structure of the church.

We old-timers remember when, before Vatican II, we pictured the church as a pyramid: the pope and hierarchy on top, the laity on the bottom. The council participants removed the vertical dimensions of that image, stressing that all members are simply the "people of God." For the first time in centuries we were encouraged to look and act horizontally. Today's three readings certainly support such a horizontal image.

Notice in our Acts passage how the Twelve solve the food distribution problem in the early Jerusalem church. Greek speaking widows are experiencing difficulties with Aramaic speaking food distributors. So the Twelve appoint seven new distributors. Those familiar with ancient cultures will immediately surface one common denominator of the seven: they're all Greek!

The Twelve's action implies that problems were solved in the early church not by imposing a solution "from above," but by letting those who had the problem solve the problem.

The faith in the importance of everyone in the community would later be reinforced by the author 1 Peter. His words still ring in our ears 19 centuries later: "You are 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises' of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." What a terrific resume to present to the world!

But as uplifting as these words are, John's Jesus provides us with an even more confidence-building image. During his Last Supper discourse, Jesus amazes all the men and women around the table with the promise, "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater than these, because I am going to the Father."

Growing up Catholic, I frequently was reminded that each priest was "another Christ." John would have agreed with that appraisal. But he also would have corrected such a limited application of the title. According to his theology, a priest becomes another Christ not at his ordination, but at his baptism. The priest, along with all other Christians, are other Christs. Each of us, by our baptism, is committed and expected to carry on the ministry of the first Christ. (I've mentioned in a past commentary that the normal outward sign of our willingness to continue his ministry is our receiving from the cup during the Eucharist.)

The belief that all are other Christs is a constant theme in the Christian Scriptures. The uniqueness of this pericope is Jesus' promise that we other Christs will do "greater" things than even he accomplished.

Writing more than 60 years after the historical Jesus' death and resurrection, John seems to be reflecting on the fact that followers of Jesus have, by that time, taken his ministry far beyond the confines of first century CE Palestine. The risen Jesus, in the person and ministry of his disciples, have encountered people and situations which the historical Jesus never encountered. We today are not only carrying on his ministry, we've expanded it into greater areas than it had reached at the time of the Last Supper.

The hierarchy alone could never accomplish such a feat. We couldn't be other Christs if we weren't committed to the both-and of our faith.

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