

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Apr 19th 2015

Jesus, to the roomful of his amazed, fearful friends, said: “it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day ... You are witnesses to these things.”

And Peter, standing with John and the healed man, surrounded by his fellow Jews, said: “The author of life you put to death, but God raised him from the dead; of this we are witnesses.”

Witnesses.

Whatever has happened between when Peter – standing the upper room before the resurrected Jesus – was told that he was a witness, and the healing in the Temple... whatever time has passed between those two events, Peter has not been idle.

No, he has used this resurrected time to claim his resurrected identity: no longer a betrayer at whom the cock crows; now he is a witness.

But, we might wonder, a witness to what? What has he observed and let penetrate him such that he is no longer the man who lies to hide himself from danger (“I do not know the man!”)? What has he seen?

But these questions, while real, point us in the wrong direction. Because we know what he has seen: the Lord, the Great Friend come again among his friends not with vengeance at being betrayed but instead saying “Peace be with you... Behold the marks of the nails... Touch me and see.” What we don’t know is how Peter accepted it, how he began to name himself “witness” rather than “betrayer.”

We don’t know, but we have a few clues. And they come from the early chapters of the book of Acts.

If we look closely we will notice that today’s Gospel marks very nearly the last words of Luke until the book of Acts begins, the book from which our first reading comes. And how does Peter speak in Acts, what does he say that will give us a clue to what has been happening in his heart (what we hope, too, will happen in our own) in those days and weeks after the resurrection?

In the second chapter of Acts, in the midst of the outpouring of the Spirit that is Pentecost, Peter challenges his fellow Jews to see what they had done, to admit that they had put the author of life to death. And they do see. And when they do they are “cut to the heart” and ask Peter and the apostles, “What are we to do, my brothers?”

Peter, in 2:38, replies: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

And in today’s first reading, in the midst of Temple with the healed man clinging to he and John, Peter says the same:

“The author of life you put to death ...Now I know, brothers,

that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did ...Repent, therefore, and be converted.”

What we see when we look closely is that, whenever Peter speaks these days, he tries to convince others to do one thing, the same thing he has been convinced to do: to admit the truth, accept forgiveness, and receive a great gift from the Lord, the Great Friend.

It’s this that’s been happening to him in the time that fills the space between Jesus calling him a witness and Peter claiming this identity for himself.

It’s the same thing that ought to be happening to us who are in the same empty space between the resurrection and ordinary time, between Easter and Pentecost. We ought to be in the processing of inhabiting our new title: witnesses of a great joy, witnesses that love is stronger than death; witnesses of the resurrection.

A last thought. I imagine that there must have been a moment when this happened to Peter himself. A moment when he said yes, let it happen, accepted. A moment, maybe, in the night during this in-between-time when, lying in the dark in the upper room beside his sleeping companions, he admitted what he had done, accepted forgiveness for it, and was filled with a great joy.

I imagine that it was right then in the dark that he prayed the psalm we prayed today:

As soon as I lie down, I fall peacefully asleep,

for you alone, O LORD,

bring security to my dwelling.

O LORD, let the light of your countenance shine upon us!

You put gladness into my heart.

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