

ECHOING GOD’S WORD
in
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
April 21, 2024

SCRIPTURES:

Acts 4:8-12	Jesus is the cornerstone of the building.
1 John 3:1-2	Through the Risen One, we are children of God.
John 10:11-18	He is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us.
Psalms 118	The one rejected is now the foundation of the Church.

READ THE SCRIPTURES:

Read the Scriptures carefully in your group, beginning with the Gospel. Take a few minutes in silence to hear the Lord speaking to the heart. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the Church Community. What does God want the community to hear today?

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

John:

In John’s Gospel, Jesus uses the great I AM (YHWH) word from the Jewish Scriptures. The word is first revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai to identify God’s own self-revelation. Jesus applies it to himself. “I AM”: Bread of Life (6:35), Light of the World (8:12), Door (10:7), Good Shepherd (10: II), Resurrection and Life (11:25), Way, Truth and Life (14:6), True Vine (15: 1). We always need to be alert to the full impact of what Jesus says when he utters the “I AM.”

The concept of the shepherd is well known in Hebrew Scriptures. God is the shepherd of Israel. He chooses a shepherd boy, David, to represent the shepherding of God among the people. He continues to shepherd the people through the Davidic kings. Now, the Messiah will be the Great (Good) Shepherd. (The word “good” here means “ideal” or “model.”) Jesus is the ideal shepherd. He represents in a visible way the invisible God. The notion of intimacy between God and the people is similar here to the idea of intimacy in the Letter of John. To be “God’s sheep” is the same as to be “God’s children.” The Shepherd loves and cares for the sheep just like a parent loves and cares for children. All who are part of the ‘flock’ are beloved of the Father.

In our culture, we do not spontaneously think of our Church leaders as ‘shepherds,’ though we use this word all the time. When we think of the image, we do not get the notion that we are referring to popes, bishops, priests and lay leaders in the Church. ‘Shepherds’ are not part of our everyday experience. It is like something terribly old or utterly foreign. Maybe that is why Church leaders are perceived as remote and ‘different from us.’ We need a new image for Jesus and for our Church leaders, one that conforms to the culture in which we live. In the Cursillo Movement, people use the term “Brother Jesus.” That may be useful for people who have strong family ties as members of the Latino community do. I am not sure that the term means very much to a nation that feels isolated and fragmented. Where families have not been loving and supportive, ‘brother’ may not convey too much that is positive. Political terminology may not be very helpful. We do not spontaneously trust our civic leaders! In the meantime, we try to find meaning in the shepherd image.

Acts:

Sadducees and Pharisees: These religious factions among the Jewish people were often hostile to each other. Sadducees claimed allegiance only to the written Law; they recognized none of the oral tradition that had developed since the sixth-century Exile. They did not believe in the resurrection of the body. Pharisees held to a large body of teachings and practices that had developed since the Exile: a precise interpretation of the Law and belief in the resurrection. They believed that, in the future, the faithful ones would rise from the dead. Peter and John say that the resurrection is now, in Jesus Christ; and its effects are now, in us. Despite the frequent disagreements between Jesus and the Pharisees related in the Gospels, Jesus was closer to the Pharisees in his teaching than he was to the Sadducees.

1 John:

In Hebrew understanding, “to be the child of” meant to “live out the qualities of one's father.” If we are God’s children, we must live a moral life in conformity with the holiness of God. In Israel, the people of God were sometimes called God’s children, as a community. The king, as head of that community, was “God's son.” Now, all who believe in Jesus Christ enjoy that same intimate relationship. To be children of God means that we must live by the values of the one who is our Father. There had to be a moral or ethical dimension in the lives of those who claimed God as their Father

QUESTIONS

1. Did your faith formation and religious upbringing give you a sense of intimacy with God? Are you aware that God loves you? What are some of the images that help you grasp that sense of God’s personal love for you? Do you see yourself as a *sheep* in God’s flock? Or as a *child* in God’s family? Or as an *adult* and *companion* of the Lord Jesus Christ?

2. Discuss your appreciation of the Church or the Christian community as *flock of Christ*, loved and cherished by him. Do you see your parish, your family, your prayer group, as a part of the *flock of Christ*? Does Christ only love you personally or is Christ also cherishing the unit of faith to which you belong? Do you feel loved by God as a Church member or as an individual?

3. How do you experience the leadership of Christ in the Church? As one of caring and love? Do you feel that Christ is actually guiding your church in the ways of truth? Do your parish leaders provide nourishment for your spiritual life?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Spend some time with your group or your family evaluating the power and presence of the Risen Christ in the life and actions of your group or family. Try to become aware of that power and life in your midst.

PRAYER

I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people.
And to him my soul shall live;
my descendants shall serve him.

From Psalm 22

CATHOLIC DOCTRINE

In the earliest experience of the Christian Church, the distinction between clergy and laity may not have been as rigidly fixed as it is today. Leadership in the community was based (1) on God's special gifts to certain persons and (2) recognition-designation by the community. Ordination most likely was not as formal as it became later. Laity and clergy both served in various functions. Eventually, leadership in eucharistic prayer became reserved to the ordained clergy. Over time, most functions in the Church came under the control of the priests and bishops. Only priests or deacons proclaimed the Scriptures to the assembly; only priests and deacons gave holy Communion. The laity came to have very few duties except to "pay and pray!"

Of course, in times of emergency and in critical situations, provisions were always made for the needs of the community. Flexibility was always possible when circumstances required it.

Vatican II brought about an official recognition of the role of the laity in the Church. The restoration of the laity to its rightful place in the Church is one of the great achievements of the council. The Church includes both laity and clergy. The people of God are a community of love founded on the common baptism of all believers. The Church as communion of love in Jesus Christ does not primarily consist of a hierarchical structure. The community comes first. The structure comes in service to the unity and effectiveness of the community. Priests and bishops are not outside the Church. They have a presiding role in the Church, but they are not the Church by themselves.

The Church as a community of faith and love fulfills the threefold functions of Christ in the world: 1. to teach the good news, 2. to celebrate the mysteries of salvation, 3. to point the way, to lead and guide toward the kingdom of God. It is the whole community that does these things, not just the clergy. The whole Church is responsible for the Gospel, for proclaiming the kingdom, for offering the sacrifice of the Eucharist. The whole Church celebrates penance or reconciliation. The whole Church anoints the sick and witnesses marriages, etc. The whole Church does the works of the Church.

Not without the presiding role of the ordained clergy, though, does the Church act as Church. The priest presides; the community celebrates.

See: The Catechism: #897-913; 940-943

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