

May 19, 2019

I like to write homilies earlier, and I am normally done by Tuesday. The other day it was Thursday I had no ideas for this homily. Or I had ideas, but they were all topics I had recently spoken on, so I began doing what any priest does in that situation: I phoned a friend. I tried seven different priest friends. One didn't have time to chat, one was on retreat, one had not looked at the readings yet, and four did not answer. Caller ID is evil. I vaguely remember being in a car as a seminarian when a priest called his friend to do the same thing. He asked, "what should I preach about Sunday?" and his friend replied, "Preach about the Gospel." That's good, because in many ways today's Gospel passage is a summary of the whole Gospel.

"The Father and I are one."

Jesus Christ is not some wise teacher. He is not the greatest saint. He is truly God. Two-thousand years ago, in the town of Nazareth, a woman said yes to God, and he became flesh. In courageous circumstances, she said yes to being the Mother of God. This is so central to our faith that the prologue to the Gospel of John used to be read at every Mass. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." This has changed everything.

"I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish."

Jesus Christ died that we might die no more. It was not always clear what happened after death, and Christ shows us we look upon the Father face to face, the one thing that is meant to fill our hearts. To make this possible, he became the priest, the one offering the sacrifice, the lamb, the one sacrificed, and the altar, the place where the sacrifice takes place. This is why we bow to the altar at Mass, as it represents Christ. We hear this in the preface to the Eucharistic prayer.

"By the oblation of his Body
he brought the sacrifices of old to fulfilment
in the reality of the Cross

Meaning all the old Testament sacrifices, from Abraham being willing to offer his only son to Melchizedek offering bread and wine to the lambs in the temple all prefigure or foreshadow Christ.

It continues,

"and, by commending himself to you for our salvation,
showed himself the Priest, the Altar and the Lamb of sacrifice."

This is why in the Book of Revelation we see the saints, washed clean by baptism in the blood of the lamb, standing with palm branches around the lamb seated on the throne, worshipping. We have a beautiful depiction of the lamb on our altar.

So how do we get from this imperfect and sinful world to that glorious scene in the Book of Revelation?

“My sheep hear my voice;
I know them, and they follow me.”

We follow. It means we must take up our cross, and this might cause us great suffering. Saints have lost their lives for Christ. We hear their names in the Eucharistic prayer. It might require heroic living. Friday we celebrated the feast of Saint Damien of Molokai, who left Belgium to minister to lepers in Hawaii, becoming a leper himself. He became a leper for lepers, meaning that he could not return to civilization again. He lived a different form of martyrdom and sacrifice. It might require the daily sacrifice of picking up our cross each and every day, like so many mothers heroically do caring for and loving their families by living their vocation of motherhood and sacrament of marriage to the full.

So today's Gospel passage summarizes in five short lines who we are, who Jesus is, where we are doing, and how we get there, if we have the courage and the will to ask Jesus to give us the grace that we might be faithfully follow where the shepherd leads.