

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 14:23–29. In this reading, Jesus announces His Ascension. The event of Jesus’ Ascension will be an occasion of blessing for those who do love Him and keep His word. They will receive the Holy Spirit and it will be a time of love, belief, joy, and peace. This passage has some important teachings for us as disciples who wish to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and the gifts that will accompany the Spirit’s presence.

One of the first things to note in this passage is that Jesus establishes the priority of love as the motivation and source of a disciple’s obedience when He says, “Whoever loves me will keep my word” (see Jn 14:23). Jesus didn’t say, “If someone fears me he will keep my word” and nor did He say, “If someone wants a blessing he will keep my word.” By identifying love as the motivation and foundation of a disciple’s obedience, Jesus is teaching us two things.

First, the Lord is instructing us on the need to clarify and purify the motivations for our own discipleship. When we think about the various reasons that can motivate us to attend Sunday Mass or to fulfill the other obligations of our faith lives, we can see how easily we could be motivated by factors other than love of God. Even works of charity for the poor can be motivated by a humanitarian desire for altruism rather than a holy desire to put our love of God into action as willing instruments of Jesus’ work in the world. It is important for disciples to clarify and purify their motivations for faithful obedience. It’s not enough to just do the right thing, we are also called to do it for the right reason.

Second, Jesus is teaching us that love is more than an emotion. It is a radical commitment to Jesus that is lived out in visible ways. It is important to remember that there are many different kinds of love but that disciples are called to allow the very love of God to flow through them into the world. Such a love is not humanly possible on our own but only when we offer our lives to God as a sacrificial gift can we become such disciples. In Greek, that kind of love is described by the specific term *agape*. In this passage, Jesus tells us that when we allow Him to love others through us then we will want to be obedient to His will even as He was obedient to the Father’s will as a manifestation of their loving relationship. This kind of love is not a sentimental or emotional feeling and it is certainly not based on natural affections or affinity with others. *Agape* love seeks to do the will of God in every thought, word and deed of a disciple’s life.

How have you had to clarify and purify your own motivations for discipleship over the course of time?

When are you tempted to be obedient to Jesus because of some reason other than love of God?

What loving actions of Jesus are most challenging to fulfill in your life?

In what ways can people be tempted to disassociate their love for God from their need to live out that love in faithful obedience to Jesus’ commands?

Next, Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit will “teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you” (see Jn 14:26). The reality is that Jesus had so much to reveal to the disciples but the

fullness of that revelation was too much for them to receive all at once. Over the course of time, even centuries, the role of the Holy Spirit has been to unfold consistently and authentically the truth of the Gospel for people of every place and time.

As the Church faced controversies and crises throughout the centuries, the Holy Spirit guided the faithful to an ever-deeper understanding of that Truth which is the person of Jesus (see Jn. 16:13 and 1Cor 12:3). We benefit from 2,000 years of ongoing teaching from the Holy Spirit. The work of Holy Spirit is a movement of constant renewal that seems to affect only the life of individuals, but ends up transforming human history. The fourth century Christian author Didymus the Blind wrote, “Finding us in a state of deformity, the Spirit restores our original beauty and fills us with His grace, leaving no room for anything unworthy of our love.”¹

For the renewal of people’s hearts, The Spirit leads us to a deeper understanding of the truth of Jesus as an ever new and ever fresh experience of salvation. We should never wish that our faith would remain only that of the first century Church. To do so would be to ignore the gift of the Spirit who has taught us and brought to remembrance of the truth of Jesus over the past two millennia. On the other hand, we do need to remain vigilant that our faith develops in an authentic way and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus taught His disciples while He was with them during His earthly ministry and now Jesus promises the gift of the Holy Spirit to continue His teaching ministry in the life of the Church.

What are some of today’s situations that the Church of the First century did not have to address?

How does our rich knowledge of faith, developed over the past two millennia, help us and equip us to respond to these unique challenges?

Have you ever had the opportunity to trace a teaching of faith from its origin in the scriptures and through its development over the past 2,000 years so as to better understand what authentic development of faith look like? What was that belief and how did the experience of historical critical study illumine your understanding of that belief?

How do we experience the Holy Spirit teaching us today and how do we know when it is truly the Holy Spirit?

Jesus promises to give us a peace that the world cannot give. For an extensive reflection on Christ’s gift of peace, you are encouraged to consult the *Come Follow Me* reflection for the Second Sunday of Easter Year C. A brief summary with key points from that reflection is provided here for your convenience.

Summary: We tend to think of peace as merely the absence of violence. In reality true peace is much more than the absence of violence. Peace is the presence of justice. Justice in the biblical sense meant that a person was in right or balanced relationship in a four-fold way: with God, with self, with others, and with the created world. When all

¹ Didymus the Blind, *Treatise on the Trinity*, lib. 2, 12: PG 39, 667–674.

those relationships were in harmony, a person was understood to be in peace. However, sinful humanity can never restore our relationship with God and so this biblical peace could not be realized until Jesus reconciled God and man through the blood of His cross (see Eph 2:13-16). The peace that Jesus offers, then, is a peace that flows from forgiveness and communion.

In this Sunday's passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us clearly that His peace comes from communion and right relationship with the Father. This right relationship is only possible through the Lord's gift of the Holy Spirit who can draw us into the life and love of the Trinity through Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus. That is why the gift of peace follows from the gift of the Holy Spirit (see Gal 5:22). When we know and experience communion with God then we know there is no power on earth greater than the Lord. In the words of Saint Paul we read, "If God is for us, who can be against?" (Rom 8:31). The confident peace Paul describes gives us courage and removes fear from our hearts when faced with adversity or opposition in discipleship.

It is important to remember that Jesus speaks about the gift of His peace in the context of the Last Supper. He knows what is going to take place and even comments on the distress about to unfold in succeeding verses. In Jn 15:12-15 Jesus will speak about the laying down of His life. In Jn 15:18-27 Jesus will speak about the world's hate. In Jn 16:31-33 Jesus foretells His abandonment while commenting on the peace He wants for the disciples and that He Himself will experience because of His communion with the Father. Following the Last Supper, Jesus will be arrested, tortured, unfairly condemned, denied and cursed by His closest friends, crucified and abandoned by all but a few. Yet our Lord will experience peace even in the midst of these distressing events because of the Father's presence with Him.

That is the peace Jesus wants for us and that is the peace He accomplished on the cross of Calvary. We can experience this peace now through the gift of the Holy Spirit who brings the consolation and comfort of God into our lives. The world cannot give this peace because the world cannot give the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to those who love Him and obey Him.

Jesus' gift of peace through the Holy Spirit is not just an interior consolation that quells our fears. It must also have an external effect in our lives. This peace must give us confidence and courage in the face of fear. This courage must overcome any intimidation that would silence or paralyze disciples from being active witnesses of Jesus in the world. Such a witness will be especially critical when Jesus' departure takes place.

It should be remembered that our Lord's promise of peace is a gift to those who love Jesus and who keep His words (see Jn 14:24). We cannot expect to experience the peace of Christ unless we are radically committed to Jesus and living for Him all the day and every day. Our loving obedience allows us to be joined to Him spiritually in such a way that even now we are drawn into the divine life of the Father with Him through the indwelling gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' peace flows from that communion.

When do you experience your deepest sense of Christ's peace in your life?

As you think about peace having its origins in justice, which of those four-fold relationships do you need to adjust in your life so you can be in right relationship?

What does it mean to you that Jesus established our peace through the blood of His cross (see Col 1:20)?

How does your awareness of communion with God give you a sense of enduring peace?

How does the world typically try to offer peace and why do those efforts lack enduring or satisfying success?

How can people erroneously hope to experience the peace of Christ without loving and being obedient to Jesus?

We pray with Jesus' very words from this Sunday's Gospel every time we gather for Mass and prepare to receive Communion. The priest prays, "Lord Jesus, who said to your Apostles: Peace I leave you, my peace I give you; look not on our sins, but on the faith of your Church and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will. " How does this prayer take on greater significance and meaning for you knowing it occurs immediately before Communion and in light of the above reflection on the gift of Jesus' peace?

Jesus' reminds the disciples about the important necessity of loving Him for a reason which is identified later in the passage when He says, "If you loved me.." (see Jn 14:28). This comment does not mean the disciples have no love for Jesus but rather than their love for the Lord is somehow deficient. The deficiency is identified by their lack of rejoicing in Jesus' return to the Father. The disciples were sad to see Jesus go to the Father because they were thinking only of how His physical absence would impact them.

Their self-centered focus prevented them from rejoicing in the more important effects and blessings of Jesus' departure. It is not only for Jesus' benefit that He return to the Father but also for our benefit. Because of His return to the Father He will be able to send the Holy Spirit which will be for the benefit of all disciples. However, their possessiveness of Jesus blinds them and prevents them from grasping these spiritual benefits. That is why they are filled with sadness at the thought of His departure.

In Jesus' return to the Father, a new relationship will be possible in which the Father and Son will come to dwell with disciples through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a great cause for rejoicing instead of sadness. This joy is only possible, however, when the disciples are able to rise above their human attachments to Jesus and rejoice in Him as the Sent One who returns to the One who sent Him.

The departure of Jesus will indeed take place and our Lord is preparing His disciples for it so that they will respond to it appropriately. Rather than it being a cause of sadness, fear, and distress (see Jn 14:27), it should motivate them to believe, have courage, and be at peace through the gift of the Holy Spirit with them. Our Lord's work of preparing the disciples for His departure is an important ministry that will help them look beyond His physical absence and to

recognize Him present in the Sacraments and in the community of believers which is the Body of Christ. By this recognition of His presence they will know that they are not abandoned after all and that any feelings of desolation are a sign of spiritual blindness and shallow faith.

*How can your love for God be deficient (selfish and possessive) in a way that blinds you?
When have you been sad because God's actions challenged you to deeper spiritual growth?*

How has the Lord prepared you for otherwise unpleasant events in such a way that when they came to pass you were able to experience them with peace and rejoice in them as part of God's unfolding perfect plan?

Jesus came to accomplish the salvation of the world and not just to comfort His closest disciples. In order for our Lord to accomplish His mission of salvation, He had to act in ways that the disciples did not always understand. When has God's action for the salvation of the world been disconcerting for you?

What helps you to rejoice in God's plan even when you don't understand it or prefer it due to human limitations?

One last comment should be made regarding the question of Jude that prompts our Lord's teaching in this Sunday's Gospel passage. In Jn 14:22 we are told, "Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?'" When we read this Sunday's Gospel passage in the context of Jude's question then we properly realize that love and obedience not only precede our Lord's self-revelation to disciples but are actually a condition for that self-revelation.

This is a challenging message because often times we can approach our faith life such that our obedience and our love are the result of God's revelation. Namely, if God reveals Himself then we will love Him and obey Him. This passage tells us that it doesn't work that way. If we are waiting for God's self-revelation to us as a pre-condition for our commitment to Jesus then we may be frustrated and disappointed for a very long time. God reveals Himself most clearly to us only when we are already living our lives for Him in love and obedience.

Throughout John's Gospel Jesus has been critical of those who base their faith on convincing signs. Sign-based faith is shallow and conditional. Jesus will not entrust Himself to such a human heart (see Jn 2:24). When Jesus appears to Thomas in the upper room, our Lord will esteem the faith of those who believe without needing signs (see Jn 20:29). For this reason, the question of Jude evokes an important teaching: Jesus will not reveal Himself to a world that refuses both love and belief.

This passage should encourage us during this Easter Time to deepen and purify our authentic love for the Lord while also becoming more obedient to His commands. Only then will we be able to see more clearly the Risen One who comes with the Father to dwell with us in the Holy Spirit.

When are you tempted to wait for the Lord's revelation before committing your love and obedience to Him?

Sometimes our faith life seems to stagnate and in those moments we can pray for greater grace and growth. God wants to give us such grace but oftentimes the Lord awaits our deepened commitment first. What obstacles have blocked you in your faith life and how does this truth motivate you to deepen your love and obedience to Jesus?

Jesus' self-revelation to us is not so much a reward for our commitment of faith as it is a confirmation that our faith is correctly placed. How have you experienced confirmations of your faith commitments? What happens when a person prays for God's self-revelation as a reward rather than a confirmation?

On this Sixth Sunday of Easter, Let us pray with St. Francis of Assisi,

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; it is in dying that we are born again to eternal life."