

Easter 3

Our Gospel today is taken from the very end of St. John's Gospel. Indeed, this last chapter is said to be an addition or after-word, an epilogue, to the Gospel, although it appears in all the manuscripts that we have of this Gospel. And so, if it is in fact an addition, it was a very early addition, or epilogue, added before the Gospel became the public property of the entire church.

Our scene could be called, though somewhat irreverently, a fish-fry. Jesus cooks for his friends. Indeed, he even supplies the food which he cooks. And, as we have seen in almost all of the appearances of the risen Lord, he is at first not recognized by those who had been his companions. In our present story he is recognized first of all by the disciple John, who is here described as the one whom Jesus loved. What is our author trying to tell us by this detail? That it is love which allows someone to recognize Jesus for who he really is, the Lord. John's love for Jesus enables him to recognize him. Then he tells Peter who the man calling to them from the shore is. But then the story tells us that once they were all ashore and taking part in the meal, they dared not ask their host who he was because they now realized he was Jesus, the Lord.

And now in the second part of this story, which takes place after breakfast, the focus is fully on this theme of love and is restricted to the relationship between Jesus and Peter. Peter has denied Jesus three times. Now this Gospel will have Jesus give Peter the opportunity to cancel out his threefold denial with a threefold affirmation of his love for him. But the love which Jesus asks Peter to give him is not a romantic love. Lovers are concentrated totally on each other. Jesus wants Peter to confess his love for him, but he does not turn him towards himself but to others. When Jesus asks three times whether Peter loves him, and Peter responds positively, Jesus turns him away from himself and towards others. “Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep,” Jesus tells him. Ignatius of Loyola has written that true love shows itself in deeds. He must have learned that from this Gospel scene. Jesus is equivalently saying to Peter: If you really love me, then prove it by caring for my brethren. And down through the ages the saints have followed this command. Because of their love for Jesus, they have turned away from concentrating exclusively on him to love him in and through their service of others.

Our church is in terrible straits at the moment. We are confronted by the widespread abuse of children by priests who were unfaithful to their vow of celibacy and were such in so horrible a way. We

are also confronted by the failure of bishops throughout the world to put the safety of children above the reputation of the priesthood. May the lives of faithful service lived by good priests, by good brothers, by good sisters and by good lay men and women who have answered Jesus' question, "Do you love me?", by serving their brothers and sisters help to restore our confidence in our church and to redeem its reputation in the world. Indeed, it must be said that this terrible situation is the result of the sinfulness of the clergy, priests and bishops, and not of you, the laity of the church. But you can and should hold us accountable to yourselves.

When all is said and done, in the end our church, as this Gospel scene teaches us, is a community of love. We are those who love the Lord Jesus and attempt to manifest that love in the service of others. Therefore the only failure in our church is a failure in love. And that is what we confront in this present crisis: priests betraying true love in dealing with children, bishops betraying true love in failing to love the children of the church over and above the reputation of the priesthood. May you, the laity, find the ways and means to help us, the clergy, indeed to force us, to reform ourselves.

The end of today's Gospel shows where love should ultimately lead us. Here Jesus says to Peter: “. . . ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.’ He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God.” This second “he” here is Peter who, tradition tells us, died a martyr for the faith in Rome. This passage is for all of us. One day we will be unable to care for ourselves and will have to rely on others to do for us. It is good for us to anticipate that day by accepting it here and now in love from the hands of our loving Savior. It is good for us to rehearse that future day of incapacity by stretching out our hands, here and now, in faith, surrendering ourselves to Christ's love for us, allowing him to take us where we do not want to go, believing that in doing so we will find life and love forever.