

Easter 3, 2007

1. Last Sunday we read from the conclusion of John's Gospel, ch. 20, which was the story of the risen Jesus' appearance to the doubting Thomas. Today we read from what is called the epilogue to John's Gospel, that is, a section which has been added to the Gospel's ending and which has always been accepted by the Church as belonging to its scriptures. Like ch. 20, this 21st chapter is a story about the appearance of the risen Jesus to his disciples. Seven disciples are mentioned as being present. The doubting Thomas of the previous ch. is mentioned. Then there are James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Nathaniel, and two others who remain nameless, although later on one of them will be identified as the disciple whom Jesus loved. Finally, there is Simon Peter.

2. This story and the one which precedes it are similar not only because they both speak of the risen Jesus' appearance to his disciples but also because they both tell us about the rehabilitation of these disciples. In ch. 20 Thomas' fellow disciples tell him that Jesus is alive, that they have seen him, but he tells them that he will not believe until he puts his fingers in his hands and side. But when Jesus then appears to him, Thomas is content with seeing

him and calls Jesus his Lord and God. Thus Thomas' rehabilitation is his transition from unbelief to belief.

3. Here in ch. 21 we witness Peter's rehabilitation. He has denied Jesus three times. So now Jesus asks him three times to profess his love for him. The SS tell us that when Jesus was arrested, all his disciples fled in fear. The only one who reappears to be with him in his death is the beloved disciple, John, who stands at the cross with Jesus' mother. When we meet the others again they are huddled together behind locked doors for fear that they too will be killed. But the SS also tell us that two of them did more than just flee. They actually denied Jesus. One was Judas, the other Peter. Matthew's Gospel tells us that Judas repented his action and tried to return the money but his offer was rejected. So he threw the money into the temple and went out and hung himself. What did Peter do? He found the others. At first you might think that they would have refused to take him in, but they were in almost the same position as Peter. They too had denied Jesus by abandoning him. And so when Jesus appears to them all and greets them with love-- Peace to you, he says--we must remember that this greeting is his rehabilitation of them. He is accepting them back as his friends even though they had betrayed him.

4. In this scene from John's Gospel, Peter is singled out for a special rehabilitation: a threefold confession of love to wipe out his threefold denial. If we have ever accepted back a friend who has betrayed us in some way, or if we have ever been accepted back by a friend whom we have betrayed, we can know what this meeting between the risen Jesus and Peter must have been like. We realize that Jesus' simple greeting of peace to Peter and the others was more than a simple greeting of peace. It was his forgiveness of their betrayal. It was their rehabilitation.

5. But note that Jesus now turns Peter to his job. He is to do what Jesus had been doing. He is to feed Jesus' sheep. And then Jesus speaks of Peter's future death. When you were young, Peter, you were in charge, you went where you wanted to go; but when you are old, others will take charge of you and lead you where you do not want to go. But must we not say that the rehabilitated Peter was already beginning to do that? He had learned not to rely on his own strength. Now he had to rely on the strength which Jesus gave him.

6. Denial, rehabilitation and service: these are the three realities we see in Peter. He is a model for us. Once our relationship with the risen Lord is reestablished, Jesus turns us to our work, which is to

feed his sheep. Having been forgiven and loved, we can offer others our love and forgiveness. And we also learn not to rely on our own powers but on those of Jesus working in us.

7. Sisters and Brothers, let us reflect on the fact that our faith is ultimately based on our personal relationship with the risen Jesus, just as Peter's was. Let us nourish that relationship in prayer and allow it to lead us to the service of each other in forgiveness and love.