

Easter.5

Did you ever hear what Pope John XXIII, pope from 1958 to 1963, said to someone who asked him how many people work in Vatican City. He quipped: “Oh, about half.” I often think that the same thing could be said about the trees here in New England because they work only six months a year. The rest of the year they rest. But then, come April or, at the latest, May, they are working again. And they make everything new. It is hard to believe that we are living in the same place. Everything becomes new with color, and, to steal a line from one of the Easter prefaces, “we are once again made whole.” For it is only too obvious to all of us that we are affected by the weather. When it is winter, we hide in the comfort of our homes, but, come spring, we want out. Like the trees, we blossom.

Our faith is a spring. We are all reborn, we are all made new in Jesus. The fact that Jesus was born and lived among us, the fact that he has been raised up by the Father after his death—these two facts make the world and us new. It is a new beginning, and it promises a new end for us as individuals, for us as a human race, and even for our planet and the universe of which it is part. All is made new. All is given new life.

This is such a big idea that we can grasp it only with the greatest difficulty. On the other hand, it is also an idea which finds an echo in the hearts of most people, if not all. Some people say they are not concerned about an after-life. It is enough to live well here. Indeed, some people, even religious people, would say that a concern for what happens to us after death as individuals is really just a form of egoism, of selfishness, of continuing to look out for “numero uno.” Personally, I think that is extreme. Is being concerned about what happens to me and my family after death really a form of selfishness? I don’t think so. In any case, our faith teaches us that we, both as individuals and as a race, are promised life. And in that new life we won’t be concerned about being first. We will simply all rejoice in being with God, and we will be focused on Him, not on ourselves.

And what will this new life be like? We can describe it in one brief sentence from today’s second reading from the Book of Revelation: “He (God) will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away.” In one word, we will be in Paradise.

But not everything good is simply something in the future. No, the present reality, history, is also affected by this future promise. And here we can draw on two sentences from our readings, one again from the second reading from the Book of Revelation, the other from today's Gospel from John. In Revelation we read: "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race." And what does this God dwelling with us say to us? He says: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

St Augustine asks how Jesus can call this commandment new since it was already given in the Old Law: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." What is new, Augustine says, is that we are to love each other as Jesus has loved us. So it is the phrase, "as I have loved you," which makes this love new. When we love in this way, we become new people, Augustine says. It makes us all members of one body, and as such we look out for each other and suffer with one another and rejoice with one another. Such love is not based on selfishness, and it reaches beyond the common humanity we all share for its motivation. It makes us all sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of His Only Son. Augustine concludes: "This love is the gift of the Lord who said: 'As I have loved you, you also must love one another.' His object in loving us, then, was

to enable us to love each other. By loving us himself, our mighty head has linked us all together as members of his own body, bound to one another by the tender bond of love.”

When I read that, I feel like quoting another line from John’s Gospel, that of the people who, having heard Jesus talk about his body as the bread he will give them, say: “This is a hard saying...,” and then begin to walk away, because it is hard at times to love the other members of our church when they seem to differ from us in their political opinions, in their liturgical tastes, and in many other ways. And yet there it is. We are members of the same body, and we are to love each other as the head of this body, Jesus, loved us. So, let us try to do that. And if you have been sitting next to the same people for forty-two years and still don’t know their names, would you please introduce yourselves to them now. In fact, why don’t we all greet each other now. I will do so too. That will be our “Kiss of Peace” for today.