

4/18/2004

EASTER II

John 20:19-31, C

What thoughts, dreams, hopes arise in you when you hear this word: **peace**? The word speaks of a reality for which everyone I know longs. Sometimes we long for it more than at other times, but never do we *never* long for it. When my mother-in-law was asked by her children what she wanted for her birthday or Christmass, she most always replied, "Peace...and quiet."

PEACE. This is a gift to us from our risen Lord. Did you notice in today's gospel that he three times greets his disciples with "Peace be with you?"

But what is this peace which the risen Jesus extends to all, and how do we receive it? Let's move towards the answer to those questions through Harry, the parishioner of a priest-acquaintance of mine, sixty years of age when my friend first met him. Three of Harry's six children had left the Church, one of his sons had gone through chemical dependency treatment, Harry had lost his job, and his wife was supporting him and one daughter by giving piano lessons in their home. Very much "down on his luck," wasn't he? Not conducive to peace!

Now, in Harry's parish, like ours, many of those who came to daily Mass stayed after, for breakfast and fellowship. One morning they were reflecting on the gospel of the Mass, the gospel we just heard. In the course of the conversation, Harry shared this:

"You know, for many years I thought that God had promised us happiness. I thought that if I remained faithful to the Church, read the Bible daily and lived a moral life, then God would give me happiness.

"As the years passed, though, I experienced a fair amount of unhappiness. Our family had lots of struggles. At first I thought that something was wrong with me; then I began to be angry with God.

"But one day, after years of reading the scriptures, it struck me that nowhere does Jesus promise us happiness. I thought I must have missed it. So I went through the gospels again. I was right: Nowhere does Jesus promise us happiness.

"What he promises us is peace. And what has been happening to me is that, though I may not be happy, I have peace. And this is more than I could ever have hoped for."

Harry was right: Jesus does not promise us happiness. The risen Jesus promises us, gives us his peace. What is it? Well, first of all, realize what happiness is: it's our emotional reaction to having life as we want it, getting what we want or being pleased with what we get, and not having to take what we don't want. That being the case, happiness waxes and wanes with the circumstances of life.

But peace, the peace which Christ gives, is not a reaction to circumstances. It is a conviction of one's mind and heart which supersedes all circumstances. If you'd known Harry, I wouldn't have to describe this conviction to you. But since you don't, let me tell you what we saw in him:

An abiding conviction that life and the world are in the hands of a power greater than our own. **A settled confidence** that no matter what trials and difficulties we face, we are not alone, never alone, but that the One who stands *behind* all things, stands *beside us* IN all things. **A security** that we are loved, **a trust** that healing is ever offered to us, **a certitude** that forgiveness is ours for the asking.

Think of it: To have such a conviction, confidence, security, trust, certitude...to have such **peace** – wouldn't that be better to have than having any circumstances of our lives such that we are happy?

For circumstances change, but peace abides.

Why does peace abide? **Because Jesus abides.** You see, Jesus IS our peace. This is so because the risen Jesus is the proof of God's love for us and of God's power to overcome everything which tears us down and shatters our happiness. When proof such as this walks with you through life, you walk in peace.

Which means that the answer to the question, "How do I receive peace?" is simply: **Receive Jesus.** Peace is the result of having Jesus in your life, knowing Jesus. Notice what I said: I did not say knowing ABOUT Jesus, but KNOWING Jesus, Jesus being a palpable presence to you, with you. Peace is the result of having Jesus as your companion in your everyday.

So how do you get this peace, who is Jesus? One of Jean's and my sons once said to me, "I hope one day God will be as real and close to me as he is to you and Mama." I replied, "Let him be. Ask him to be. God is THE gentleman. He waits to be invited in."

You want Peace? Peace is Jesus. You get it by getting him. So let Jesus into your life; invite him in. It is that simple AND that complicated. Simple, in that it is yours for the asking. Complicated in that the asking of Jesus into your life must be done on at least two levels:

- One asking is with the lips of your heart. You pray "Come to me, Jesus. Give me yourself." You pray it not once, but day by day, perhaps many times throughout a day.
- The other asking is with the lips of your life. This is what that entails: You must immerse yourself in the community of Jesus' friends, the Church, sharing fully in their life: it is a life of faithful worship, active service, and full fellowship. Further, you must be willing to struggle against every temptation, to be obedient to the way of life to which Jesus calls those who would be his friends, and to repent when you fail. To try to get cheaply Him who is priceless is not to want him at all.

I want you to understand this about what I've just said: For God to love us and give himself to us, God needs nothing from us. He will love us and give himself to us whether we do anything or not. It is not God who needs what I've told you to do to "get him." It is we who need to give these things in order to "get him": they turn us from ourselves to him and thus open us up to receive his gifts, the first gift being the realization of his presence with us and of how very much we are loved by him, regardless, regardless of what we do or don't do.

With us and God, it is the way it is with Jean and our sons. We love them. There is nothing they can do to destroy our love for them and our desire to be united to them in joy, giving and pouring our lives into theirs. But for them to receive this, its benefit, they must offer themselves to us, open to us.

Recall how things happened with Thomas. When the risen Jesus first appeared to his disciples, Thomas was not among them. He had rejected life in Jesus' community, and was off, preoccupied with himself, nursing his own grief and disappointment, doing his own thing. When his fellows reported to him Jesus' appearance, Thomas doubted their witness.

But note - Thomas' statement is a form of request, faith seeking an answer: "Unless I see...I shan't believe." And while Thomas, like us, may have been too much of a self-centered individualist, he

was not stupid. Even while disbelieving, Thomas returned to the fellowship of his friends, to the community of the Church. When Jesus came again, he was there, and he received **Peace**. Faith and peace, you see, are not received on our own. They are gifts which come through our life in the community of Jesus' friends, for Jesus, as he promised, resides in his community: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I."

Most of us start our life in Christ's family thinking, like Harry, that remaining faithful to the Church, reading the Bible, trying to live a moral life will protect us from unhappiness and harm. These things will not; they are not intended to.

These disciplines are simply ways in which our heart asks for that Peace which passes all understanding. That Peace which is at the center of this swirling cosmos. That Peace which can carry us through this often unhappy life into an eternity of joy. That Peace whose name is Jesus. So, if you have never asked Jesus into your life, do so throughout this Easter Season. And even if you have asked, keep asking all your days, for when we sin we take back the request. Peace can be yours, because Jesus is yours. Yours and mine, but for the asking.