

Easter V
April 20, 2008
Jn 14.1-14
Fr. M. Dow Sanderson

+++

The section of the fourteenth chapter of John's Gospel (that we have just heard) is one of the most famous passages of scripture for Christians.

It is most often encountered in the burial liturgy, since Our Lord is most insistent about the truth of resurrection: Let NOT your hearts be troubled. You believe in God. Believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. And I go to prepare a place for you. If it were NOT so, I would have told you.

Christians have taken great comfort in these words, and well we should. When we feel the long shadow of death upon us, it is our joy and strength to know that Christ has conquered death, and is, in fact, preparing a place even for us.

But this passage of John's Gospel is also quite controversial! In fact, not too long ago...at President Gerald Ford's funeral... certain verses of the Gospel assigned for the liturgy were selectively edited. Or to be more correct, they were simply omitted.

And what, pray tell, could make a mere Episcopal priest think he knew more than Jesus? What could be so offensive?

Ah, that troublesome verse! Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going, how can we know the way?' Jesus said unto him, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me.'

The fear, of course, is that in our pluralistic culture, saying something so exclusive might offend. And God knows, the last thing we would want to be is offensive!

Now to be fair, it IS true that Christian triumphalism is a sin. Our Lord did not coerce people to believe in him, and neither can we. When he was high lifted up on the cross, it was the example of his humility, his willingness to be shamed and reviled for our sake that drew men to him.

There is nothing coercive about the love of Jesus, and there should be nothing coercive about how we evangelize.

How and if God saves any soul is his business, not ours. Our job is but to share, by word and example, the good news of the Gospel.

But there must BE good news to tell!

Recently, our new bishop was asked by a national publication, to give his thoughts on this particular verse of John's Gospel. Is Jesus, in fact, THE way... or merely a way.... among many paths? And he responded with honesty and charity... We get all tied up with the question...whether he is the only way... The truth is Jesus IS God.

It was a simple answer. And anyone who says the creed knows that it is what the Church has always taught...

Imagine my amazement, then, when his answer provoked an outrage. The bold headline to the Letters to the Editor section read: Careless theology! If the new bishop wants to be taken seriously, he should be more precise!.

An entire page was then devoted to the alleged lack of care and precision.

And what, pray tell, did these two letter writers (both of them priests) find objectionable? They did not like the fact that he made an unqualified statement about the divinity of Jesus. Never mind that God of God. Light of Light, begotten not made...is itself somewhat definitive. But the "new" orthodoxy is completely dismissive of the traditional understanding of Incarnation.

I can tell you without a hint of exaggeration, that none of the theology professors at Virginia Seminary when I was a student there believed in a literal virginal conception. And that was 25 years ago. I once protested that I did not see how they could deny the literal truth of this teaching without a) being an Adoptionist (heretic) or b) devising some equally difficult miraculous doctrine. I was summarily dismissed. I am confident that both my theology professors NOW believe.... Because they both entered their eternal reward more than ten years ago!

You and I believe that when the Blessed Virgin Mary said Be it unto me according to thy word, that Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, was, in that instant, conceived in her womb. And we believe that the divinity of that same Jesus was the second person of the Trinity who had proceeded eternally from the Father

We believe that, do we not? A billion Roman Catholics believe it. 500 million Eastern Orthodox Christians believe it.

But liberal Protestantism has done what persecution could not. Liberal Protestantism has done more than Nero and torture and exile and the fire of martyrdom... it has robbed the Gospel of its power and confidence.

Is it any wonder that the Pope, in his visit to the United States, used some of his strongest language, not towards members of other faiths, but for fellow Christians? Fellow Christian who are in danger of selling their soul to the gods of secularism. Fellow Christians who follow, not Jesus, as Lord and God, but rather Jesus as metaphor and ideal.

In his wonderful Maundy Thursday sermon, Fr. Patrick quoted Flannery O'Connor on the eucharist. She is reported to have said (at a dinner party) If it is just a symbol, to hell with it.

It does not take much of an intellectual jump to say the same thing about the Incarnation.... if it is but metaphor and ideal.

Today...we will bow the knee as we say the creed because the Word WAS made flesh. When we pass the Tabernacle, we will genuflect... because the WORD WAS MADE FLESH. When Fr. Dan elevates the blessed Sacrament for us to adore, we will exclaim My Lord and my God! because the WORD WAS MADE FLESH.

If we believe it... it is truth and life. If we do not, it is an empty gesture at best, and idolatry at worst.

My brothers and sisters, as we continue in this Easter season, Let NOT our hearts be troubled. Let us claim the confidence that our faith provides. And let us proclaim boldly that we know and follow Jesus, who is THE way, THE truth, and The Life.

+++Amen.