Homily for Easter 3B

S. Stephen’s Providence

April 18, 2021

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Common wisdom holds that it is easier to attract flies

with honey than with vinegar.

Anyone who has any experience with marketing or sales

knows that in order to be successful,

you have to appeal to people’s wants or desires –

if you are to want to buy a product,

you have to have an implicit inkling that it will benefit you

in one way or another.

Religion, of course, speaks to the deepest needs and longings

of mankind – of all of us seekers and pilgrims on life’s journey.

I think it goes without saying, then,

that the sermon we hear Saint Peter preach in the Jerusalem Temple

in our reading from Acts this morning

would ironically not be endorsed as a model for preaching

in seminaries today.

There is no honey – no sugarcoating.

Peter is all vinegar.

Though the crowd before him may not literally be the same crowd

who shouted “Crucify him! Crucify him!” at Jesus’s sham trial,

he treats them as being just as guilty of crying out for it

and being responsible for it.

He says to his fellow Israelites,

“The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.”

In other words, God’s judgment is on you.

And the verdict is not good.

Hardly a strong selling point for inviting folks into the life of faith, is it?

And yet, this is the primitive message of the early Church.

Just the facts.

God came among us, and we killed him – but it turns out

that this Jesus has been vindicated and shown to be true.

And now it is up to us to make this known,

and to carry on practicing and teaching what he taught.

Jesus came to bring about the restoration of right relations

between God and God’s people;

but the implicit assumption of that message

is that all is not right.

All is not right with the world,

and all is not right between you and God.

Frankly, all may not be right within yourself.

Only those of us whose consciences will be convicted by that statement

will know the fullness of its truth.

All is not right.

But God has come to remedy that –

and to rescue us from our predicament;

and therein lies the beginning of the Good News:

we have been saved – we have been liberated from all the bad stuff

that enslaves us,

and given life by the Author of life, whom our sins killed.

Paradox is so often at the center of the Christian life, is it not?

Furthermore,

Peter’s invitation to faith in Christ and in God’s redeeming work

concludes with a call to repentance,

much like the opening scenes of John the Baptist’s ministry.

Peter says to them,

“And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

Repent and believe. Repent and believe.

The urgency of that earliest message is still as urgent today

as it was then.

It may be some 2,000 years since Jesus’s death and resurrection,

but all is still not right with the world.

We still stand in the light of God’s judgment,

and frankly,

we still stand worthy of being condemned in our fallenness.

We are good people –

we try our best to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves.

The water I sprinkled on you at the beginning of Mass

as a reminder of your baptism was not done so in vain.

And yet the world is broken and marked with sadness and suffering.

Though Jesus’ death and resurrection have rendered Sin and Death

powerless over us, ultimately,

they are not removed from the human experience.

We still suffer at times, and we still experience mortal death.

All you have to do is to read the paper

or watch the evening news to know that things go wrong –

seemingly more so in certain weeks than in others.

This week, we saw an uptick in the occurrence of gun violence –

a plague which has afflicted our society for far too long.

We have heard the cries of our black brothers and sisters

as yet another tragedy unfolded in Minnesota.

Folks in Indianapolis gunned down at a FedEx facility.

A 13-year-old boy who for some reason had a gun

killed by police in a stand-off.

How long, O Lord, how long?

How long shall these things persist.

And these were only a handful of events in our own country.

Around the world, other tragedies unfolded,

and other deaths were mourned.

Where is the joy of your resurrection, O Christ?

But as I reminded us in the Parish Notes email this weekend,

hopelessness is not a Christian virtue.

The Christian is necessarily compelled to be a vessel of hope,

and of trust in God’s promises.

Hope is one of the chief Christian virtues, together with faith and love.

Together, these virtues embodied

lead us to the kind of living we are called to as Christians:

namely, to seek to be a part of the ongoing unfolding

of all that Jesus’s resurrection means for the world –

to be a part of the ongoing story of the God of Israel and of Jesus,

which continues unto this day and this very moment.

This is precisely what the disciples are up to

in the passage from Acts which we’ve heard this morning:

preceding Peter’s sermon, if you noticed,

he’s healed someone.

This is the whole reason there’s a crowd assembled around him.

They’ve healed a man in the name of Jesus;

and a man who had previously eked out a living by begging for alms

is now dancing for joy at what God has done.

The disciples are quick to point out that it was not they,

but Jesus,

who healed this man.

They did it in Jesus’s name, and through faith in his name.

And it was this man’s own faith in Jesus that led to his healing

at the hands of the disciples.

The effects of Jesus’s earthly ministry, death, and resurrection

are now spilling out into all the world,

as he told them they would –

and the disciples are caught up in this post-Resurrection life.

As Jesus says to the disciples at the conclusion

of today’s Gospel reading,

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

This is the commission the disciples receive from him,

and they carry it out without reservation;

they alone are privileged to continue to heal in his Name,

much the same way as they did while he was alive with them.

This invitation to participate in the Risen Life of Jesus –

to be a part of the ongoing work of the Spirit,

to be a part of the ongoing story of redemption,

is likewise extended to us.

We may not be causing men who could not walk to run and leap;

but maybe we can identify more with the lame man

who was healed by the disciples, and is now dancing for joy:

we have experienced the healing and the joy of the Risen Christ

through others, and through the rites of the Church.

And so there is work for us to do:

to be agents of reconciliation wherever we can be –

in our families, in our neighborhoods, and in our nation.

As we prayed in our collect at the beginning of mass,

we ask that God open the eyes of our faith,

that we may behold him in all his redeeming work:

***all* his redeeming work.**

Not just some of it, or the bits in the past,

neatly confined to the pages of Scripture:

but all of it.

Even the work that is ongoing, here and now.

It is all around us, if only we will have the eyes of faith to see it.

If you are wondering right now, “Really, me?”

“What can I do?”

Or even, “Why should I feel compelled to behave in this way?”

The answer lies in the disciples’ own experience with the Risen Jesus,

which was described to us in the opening of the Gospel this morning.

Like the Disciples, we have seen the Lord:

somewhere in our own lives of faith and of seeking for God,

we have encountered the Risen Christ.

No, we did not encounter him bodily the way in which they did,

but somewhere in our journey, we have encountered that same Spirit.

The disciples are compelled to this post-Easter life

of witness to Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection

by the physical presence of his crucified body in their very midst.

He says “Look at my hands, and my feet – see my wounds.

I am no ghost.”

And in what has to be an intentionally funny moment,

sensing their incredulity and bewilderment, he asks them,

“Have you anything to eat?”

and then proceeds to eat a piece of broiled fish in front of them.

No ghost is he – this is a physical body,

which yet somehow is possible of disappearing and reappearing:

the resurrected Jesus is most certainly not the same

as the bodily Jesus that they knew.

The wounds that his resurrected body still bears

witness to the condemnation against their sins

and the sins of the world,

but also as vindication of all that Jesus has taught them

about who he is as the suffering Messiah.

Because of that simultaneous condemnation and vindication,

having received Jesus’ words of peace and of pardon,

and fueled by the knowledge of God’s power and truth,

they can move on to the place of being his hands and feet in the world:

risen and active,

though for ever bearing the marks of his passion and death.

Having been reconciled to God and to one another,

they begin to engage in the work of reconciliation

that Jesus has begun,

and that is ongoing.

It is ongoing – that is the whole point of the Book of Acts:

it continued in them, and it continues even now in you and in me.

This is what it means to live into the Easter life –

the life of one that has stepped out of the tomb

into the fullness of resurrection light with Jesus:

to name the brokenness in the world,

to condemn its injustices, its cruelties, and indifferences:

to speak God’s judgment against them,

so that people might know that another option exists for them,

and for the world:

that the author of life, whom we killed,

has opened to us the gates of eternal life,

and to a way of living that answers all of our deepest longings.

Whether we preach it with vinegar or with honey,

we are to bring others into this unfolding drama of redemption.

We are to behold with the eyes of faith

all of God’s redeeming work in our world.

And having beheld our Risen Savior in our hearts and minds,

we are compelled with our hands and feet and voices

to proclaim his redeeming work to the world,

to the praise and glory of his name.

May our Risen Lord continue to bless us,

with his hands, forever crucified,

pouring out in blessing his Spirit upon us and upon the Church

until the end of time.

As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, … With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Amen and amen.

Thanks be to God.

Alleluia. Amen. +