

5th Sunday of Easter, 15 May 2022

Scriptures: Acts 14:21-27; Revelation 21:1-5; John 13:31-35

Homily: Fr. Ken

Students in Catholic schools around the country have aggressively studied U.S. history. They have read about the Revolutionary War, about Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, about the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights. And they have read about more recent times, about World War II, the Holocaust, Korea, Vietnam, about the Civil Rights movement, about Martin Luther King, Jr., about John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, and so many other important historical figures and places.

Some students visit and spend a week in Washington, D.C. and Philadelphia. Those experiences are all new for them. It is a discovery of what they had read about, now right in front of each of them. For them, there is a freshness and newness to all they experienced.

Something of that discovery is expressed by the 20th century poet, T. S. Eliot. In his poem "The Little Gidding", he writes:

"We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and to know the place for the first time".

And it is true. After living in Europe for six years, people asked me what it was that I learned about most. By living in Europe, I learned a great deal, but I learned most about the United States.

The words of T.S. Eliot and my own experience capture our common human experience that sometimes you have to leave a place, a relationship, a way of life, in order to return to it and truly recognize it for the precious gift it is.

There is that same sense of discovering something familiar in today's scripture readings. John, in the Book of Revelations, describes the end of time as the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, with a new Jerusalem as its center. And the chief characteristic of this new city is the restoration of the original blessing that humankind experienced at the outset: "Here God lives among the people. God will make a home among them... God's name is 'God-with-them'". That is exactly the vision of paradise that is so beautifully described in the Book of Genesis, which tells us of God "walking in the garden [of Eden] in the cool of the day", seeking out Adam and Eve, in order to talk with them. The paradise that was lost is the same heaven we journey towards. Heaven means quite simply to live in the presence of the living God, to enjoy God's friendship, to be at one with God.

"Now I am making the whole of creation new", God declares. The story of God's creative activity is ongoing, the narrative of the history of our salvation is still unfolding. But for us to be able to return to what we once had, to "arrive where we started", to reach that intimate friendship with God, involves a journey for each of us, in the footsteps of Jesus. Jesus is the explorer we follow, and his path leads us into the very heart of God, who is love. "Love one another", Jesus tells us. And the pathway of love, along which he invites us, is of a very particular kind: we are to love "as I have loved you". That love is cross-shaped and is found in Jesus who kneels down to wash the feet of his friends.

Our journey to living in the presence of God, is a journey into transformation and re-creation. It involves a daily dying to self—a taking up of the cross—and is expressed in a life of service. Why? Quite simply, because this is the Christ-like love that is at the heart of who God is.

It is, as we grow in discipleship of Christ, that we grow into the presence of God. The vision, the longing to live in the presence of God, where “there will be no more death, and no more mourning and sadness”, is not just a hope for the end of time, but a reality to be experienced here and now. It is by living as disciples of Jesus, through the love we have for one another, that we can see—with clear eyes—that God is with us, and that God even now walks in the cool of the day in the garden of our lives.

By our willingness to explore the ways of Christ, by self-sacrificial love and humble service, we come to experience the power of love to transform the reality of our daily lives, making us a new creation, where God lives among the women, men, and children of our day.

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