

The Inclusive Community

Pentecost

May 31, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Memory and Testimony

John 20: 19-23

Let us assume that a man named John crafted this fourth Gospel.

Let us assume that we can trace back from this text what was in his mind as he put it together.

These are not impossible assumptions because someone was ultimately responsible for this manuscript and had to make judgments about what to include or not to include.

Let us now come to this short text and discern what it has to say to us and how it chooses to teach us.

John is confronted with two herculean tasks. The first is to deal with whether Jesus did live again, in this world, after his death and burial. The second is that, if he did, what kind of a community could be created around that memory and what testimony would it give to the world for the rest of history.

That is a lot to deal with in five verses

Let us see if he accomplishes his task.

So that we have the right context and, for the record, John is a very elderly man, the last of his kind, someone who was an original apostle. It is now some seventy years since Jesus died. All the other apostles are gone. The community of the disciples of Jesus is now present in all the major centers and cities of the Roman Empire. It is an admixture of Jewish and Gentile, some might say secular, elements.

This may be John's last chance to enlighten the community, still sorting things out, about its identity, its faith, its destiny, its mission. Let us hear him.

First, the memory.

John, tells us that the major events in the life of Jesus are one-day events. He is born on one day, obviously. He dies on one day, not so obviously, because death by crucifixion often took a number of days, Most surprisingly, however, he notes here that Easter, the Ascension, and Pentecost happened on one day. Luke's Gospel has that spread over almost two months.

It is evening on the first Easter Sunday in history. Earlier in this chapter Mary Magdalene finds the empty tomb and tells Peter and another disciple, perhaps John, to see if they can find who stole the body. Her first reaction is not belief but doubt and anxiety. Peter and the beloved disciple now run to the tomb, verify its emptiness and believe. The scene shifts back to Mary who is now the first again, to meet the Risen Christ, and speak with him. The beautiful tender, dialogue is summed up in two intimate and glorious words: "Mary...Rabboni." The Risen Christ becomes real to Mary, not by evidence, but in conversation.

The Risen Christ tells Mary she must not touch him because he has not yet ascended to the Father. Until this happens, he cannot bestow the Spirit on the disciples. It cannot be Pentecost.

Mary goes again, not just to Peter, but to all the disciples. She went to Peter to ask about the missing body. She goes to the disciples at large with the Easter message: "I have seen the Lord." Then she tells them of her encounter with him.

Now we come to today's passage.

It is evening. The disciples, not just the apostles, the disciples, are locked in a room, terrified. They fear their enemies, who crucified Jesus two days ago, will come after them.

The memory I leave with you, John tells us, is that the room was filled with peace and we saw him. Christ has already ascended to the Father and so he does not say, as he did to Mary that morning, "Do not hold onto me" but rather "he showed them his hands and his side." The peace, deep, deep peace, passes into life-expanding joy. Jesus is not lost; Christ is not gone. The evidence of this is not an empty tomb but the experience of the community and its encounter.

Jesus repeats again "Peace be with you," "As the Father sent me, I send you." So, the mission of the community is peace. It is not the message of Jesus as such but peace. The message is only the way to get to the peace.

Pentecost occurs as he gives them the Spirit by breathing on them. The breath recalls creation where the breath or Spirit of God hovers over the waters. "Receive the Holy Spirit." This is not the Pentecost of Luke with tumultuous winds and searing flames. This is quiet: a breath. All is quiet in John's Easter Pentecost.

One of the most important words in the final verses almost everyone misses. All this happens, not to the apostles, but to "the disciples." The Spirit is given to the community,

not to its leaders. The leaders receive the Spirit the community gives them. The community is given the mission to declare forgiveness and to judge.

The Spirit is a divine presence. Two of the clearest signs of divinity in the Jewish community were forgiveness and judgment. Only God could forgive sins. Only God had the right and the capacity to judge.

The Spirit given to the disciples is to forgive, to proclaim the forgiveness of all sins. Forgiveness means that the mission of the community is to bring peace, not by a message primarily, but by making people feel worthy, reconciled with their past, connected with one another, bonded with God. Forgiveness is not to be withheld but given. Peace is the mission of Pentecost.

A sign of divinity is not only forgiveness but judgment. The last words in today's passage sound mysterious and even troublesome to us. "If you forgive...they are forgiven; if you retain...sins...they are retained."

In English, this sounds as though the community can deny forgiveness. This is not what the phrase means in Hebrew. Remember, however, it is not the leaders who can do this on their own but the community. In Hebrew, the phrase does not mean you can deny forgiveness but rather I give you authority to do what I just asked you to do, namely bring peace and tell everyone they are forgiven.

"Binding and loosing" or "forgiving and retaining" are Hebrew expressions for giving someone authority. It is close to the English way of saying "You can marry me if you want; or you can tell me you will not marry me; you have the right to decide, the authority to grant me this. I cannot force you to marry me but the whole point of this conversation is that I love you and I ask you to say "yes."

On Pentecost, Jesus tells the community at large, all of us, that we have the authority to declare in God's name that all sins are forgiven. We are not to deny forgiveness but proclaim it with the assurance that this is God's Will, that there be no more enemies. We are to end forever the idea that God has enemies and seeks to punish them. This God of Easter and Pentecost, this Christ of peace and forgiveness, this Spirit descending forever on all of us, has given us a community with one mission, one ministry, one testimony, one message, one memory, one Gospel, one task, one destiny; to make this world whole, to bring the human family home and to proclaim to the ages the worth and value of the human heart.