

Homily for 7th Easter (B), May 24, 2009.

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We are now many weeks beyond Good Friday when we mourned the death of Jesus. The difficulty with all the feasts that follow Good Friday—Easter, Ascension, Pentecost—is that they are part of what we might call “the spiritual order.” They concern events which are invisible, and to accept them requires faith. It is much easier, for instance, for us to relate to a feast like Christmas. We know what babies are like. A mother sees her own flesh grow heavy with child. We all rejoice in births and birthdays. And the sad events of Good Friday are something we don’t find hard to believe because death, like birth, is so much a part of human life. Death is a grim reaper which does not cut down the blade of corn or wheat but ourselves and our loved ones—every day.

Resurrection happens every day, too, but we don’t see it in the same way that we see a baby or a corpse. Some of us believe, while others hope, that resurrection and all these spiritual events are just as real as the physical world which our senses report to us.

Look at the language we use during Ascension. We say Jesus Christ is risen on high, taken up into the heavens, seated at the right hand of the Father, and all things are put under his feet. Ascension is also his exaltation. We do not celebrate the Babe of Bethlehem or the Man of Sorrows but the triumphant One, Jesus, *kyrios* or Lord. There is a problem here for those who insist on empirical evidence, who are convinced that there must be something which can be measured, a demonstrable proof, for a thing to be real. They would say that all the scriptures we read are filled with a religious or faith language. Privately they might even say it is the stuff of fairy tales, or call it wish fulfillment or projection. For many people religious language is not “for real.”

Believers can react by stubbornly saying that we believe all this, it is our faith, we know that Jesus Christ is God as well as man and is now in the glory of the Father. Of course we believe that. But faith delights in what the mind explores, and it is the nature of being human to explore and reflect upon what has been given. So let us reflect for a moment on the reality of the spiritual world and draw upon our own experience.

For instance, there is something real, very real, about the love we have for each other. There is something astonishing and ennobling about the relationship through many years of two people in love, bonded as husband and wife. There is also something real and piercing about the love you have for your children. It is so great that it can never be measured. No wonder we speak of love more in terms of the heart and of feeling than of the head and the intellect. What we are talking about goes beyond all that. And that’s the whole point. Love, which is a work of the Spirit

and a spiritual reality, goes beyond the power of words and those physical aspects which can be seen and felt—such as touches, embraces, words, and gifts. The reality we call love is so wonderful that it literally makes life worthwhile, home someplace to come back to, and heaven something to yearn for. Love has nourished our very being and enabled us to become persons. Love is more than emotion, feeling, sentiment. It is a spiritual reality. Our experience of it is always incomplete, and this helps us to believe “there is more,” that love endures and is part of what we mean by God.

No part of the New Testament is more valuable speaking of love than the first epistle of John. You heard part of it today: “God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.” In another passage he warns that love must not remain in the abstract but pass over to deeds; he writes, “Let us love in deed and truth and not merely talk about it.” He even promises that “this is our way of knowing we are at peace before him.” (Jn 3:18-19)

In the great Spanish novel about the civil war in Spain, *The Cypresses Believe in God*, there is a good example of converting holy talk into holy deeds. The younger brother in the story, Cesar, is a devout seminarian; his vacations are spent working in the diocesan museum, where the Monsignor keeps him sheltered from the world and the maids ply him with hot chocolate. But he worries that this is not real holiness. His brother Ignacio challenges him to go into the slums of the city and do something for the poor. But what is he to do? He cannot teach catechism; they would pelt him with stones. The mother of the family is a practical Basque woman and she decides what to do. He has first to learn the barber’s trade, to know it well --how to cut hair and shave people. Then he can offer his services to the poor and broken-down bodies of mostly old people in their tiny rooms. He is guided to his first customer by the owner of the Crocodile Bar. The family celebrates; they are all happy. He is helping others, and he has that peace of mind the apostle promises.

Each of us has to find our own ways to serve. The works of love. What did the apostle tell us today? “The one who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.”