

## OUR CHURCH, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The scene in this Sunday's Gospel is once again the risen Lord talking with his closest disciples, the eleven Apostles, Judas not counted since he had betrayed Christ putting himself outside this select group. The Apostles are all a bit worried and afraid for it was becoming obvious that their leader was soon to depart and they would be left on their own. Without him how were they to function? to act? and where? The questions were too numerous to count and most of them were not voiced at all. But within each Apostle was a rising fear. Christ was very much aware of all this and he was trying to give them as much support as he could. Physically he may not be with them but somehow he will yet always be there.

It is important for us today to realize that the work of salvation was not that of Christ alone but rather was the work of the Holy Trinity, the work of God. It was God the father who spoke with Adam and Eve in that Garden of Eden. It was God the father who told them to go out and multiply, to subdue the world, in effect making them and their future posterity partners with him in completing the work of creation on this planet called earth. He gave them total freedom, taking a chance that they could misuse it with dire consequences. Their destiny was not to go it alone, but to work with him and put their stamp on creation. It was to be a joint venture. But they misused their total freedom, not wanting to be dependent on anyone. They and they alone would decide their actions. They never understood that total freedom was necessary if they were to love, for love has to be freely given and freely received to be true love. Since God had created out of love, he hoped for love to be returned, true love, not a forced love. Creation began well, but Adam and Eve deliberately chose to go against their God, go it their way and in so doing brought sin into this world. When God talked with Adam and Eve the next afternoon as was his want, he found them hiding, afraid to meet him. God's greatest fear was realized. But the love of God for his creatures would not give up. After explaining to them the consequences of their action, he also left them a veiled promise that one day he would make it all once again right.

God began the fulfillment of his promise with the call of Abraham. He set into motion his plan to send his Son into the world, to become a human being like Adam and Eve but would also remain God. And so the Second person of the Trinity now becomes involved in the work of saving the human race. When the Son did become a man in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the stage was set. Thirty years later, now as a full man, Jesus began his public ministry, teaching his chosen people a new law of love, proving his love for them by giving his life in reparation for the sin of Adam and Eve. But death could not hold him; he rose from the dead and then began to teach his chosen Apostles how they were to now continue his work, for he had to return to his Father.

Enter now the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Christ promised his Apostles that he would send the Holy Spirit upon them and he would quell their fears and give them the courage to now go out and tell the whole world the message of salvation as he had taught them over the past three years. They would not just be on their own; the Holy Spirit would be with them and their successors until the end of time. Thus man's salvation is the work of the Holy Trinity, a work that is continuing today just as it has continued in the world since the days when Jesus walked the land of Israel some two thousand years ago. Once one realizes this then the problems the church faces today no longer appear to be impossible to

solve but rather with trust in the Holy Spirit and with trust in the foundation the Apostles gave to our Church so long ago, there is then a very realistic hope of success.

All through this Easter Season, the first readings in all of the daily masses have been taken from the Acts of the Apostles, the early history of the beginnings of the Church as written by St. Luke. One of the most fascinating points that comes to the fore is the role of the twelve Apostles. This band of eleven seem to have dispersed themselves not just all over Israel, but all over the known world. Peter, James and John remain in Israel for a while until after the martyrdom of James by King Herod. It is then that Peter travels to Rome, but as the appointed head of this new Church, as he travels to many places he is, always looked upon as the head, the first Pope. John took care of Mary as Jesus had asked to do just before he died, and he eventually died of old age, the only Apostle not to be martyred. Andrew went to Greece and was martyred there. Thomas went the furthest away to the southern tip of India where he established the church and then he too was martyred. The remaining Apostles all went their own way, all eventually giving their lives in the name of the Lord.

Down through the ages, the Church has continued to grow, sometimes at a great clip, at other times much more slowly. But growing it has continued, fast or slow, up to this very day. Over the course of the last twenty centuries, there have been countless men, women and even some children who have shed their blood trying to spread the message of the Lord. There have been times of relative peace, but somehow such periods seem to have had fewer martyrs and in some ways even fewer saints. It has been in times of crisis and in times of upheavals that the Church has grown not only in numbers but also in strength. Overall it seems that in times of distress that the best of our faith and trust in the Lord shines forth. There does seem to be a law of nature that when people have to work hard, have to make great sacrifices, have to be willing to forfeit all for success, there is the greatest feeling of peace and wonder of just what it means to be truly human. Add to this a faith in the Lord, in God, and one gets a foretaste of what awaits us in heaven.

During all this time there have also been periods of great scandals in the church. This should come as no surprise, for people will always be people with virtues and vices, loves and hatreds, joys and fears, weaknesses and strengths. All are welcome in the Church Christ founded for it is in the Church that we have the helps that God has given us to ultimately succeed. The greatest mystery of our church is the fact of the Eucharist. This is something no other faith has; it is given to us by Christ. It is the miracle we experience in having the Mass, the reenactment of the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. All who partake in the Mass partake in the work of salvation in a very special way. And all who receive communion, know through faith that they for the moment are as close to the Lord as were the Apostles over those three years, in a way perhaps even closer. For it is one's faith that tells us that Christ is really still present body and soul, though hiding under the appearance of bread and wine.

And so this Gospel in today's Mass is most apropos for the times. Once again the Church is facing many problems, from the sex scandals to the inner fights about how liturgy should be done. There is still a schism between the east and west. And there is still dissention in a number of places in the world. As Christ was encouraging his Apostles he is doing the same for us today.

*Fr. Andy, S.J.*