

5th Sunday in Easter

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 6:1-7
<i>Response</i>	Lord, let your mercy be on us, as we place our trust in you
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Peter 2:4-9
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the way, the truth and the life, says the Lord; no one comes to the Father, except through me.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 14:1-12

The Fifth Sunday of Easter continues our journey through certain passages in the Gospel of John where Jesus looks beyond his own passion and death to the age of the Church, and to the giving of the spirit, and to the ministry and evangelization that the apostles are going to carry out after his death. In this case, the Church puts before us one of Jesus' sayings, one of his teachings, from the Last Supper discourse. So if you look at John's Gospel, beginning in chapter 13, we get an account of the Last Supper, and then in John 14, 15, 16 and 17 we have what is sometimes called the farewell discourse. It's Jesus's teachings to the apostles at the Last Supper, but not on the Eucharist per se, but rather just on what their lives will be like and what they will be engaged in after he's gone, after he's died, risen and ascended into heaven. So this section is a very famous section because it is focused on Jesus's identity as the way, the truth and life. So let's peek into what's going on at the Last Supper and see what Jesus says to them. John 14:1 — after having announced his departure he says this to the disciples:

"Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?"

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him."¹

Pause there for just a second. I want to break this down as we move through it. First, what's the context? Jesus is telling the apostles that he is going to be crucified and that they're going to betray him and that they're going to scatter and deny him. He's just told Peter that Peter is going to deny him three times and the apostles are starting to be troubled at the fact that Jesus is going to leave. And so he is giving them here a word of encouragement in the face of his impending death, saying "don't let your hearts be troubled because in my Father's house there are many rooms." Now people often translate this as many mansions — I think that is the old King James version — and get excited about having a mansion in heaven, but literally the Greek there is *monē*. It's from the Greek word *menó*, which means to remain. So it's a dwelling place, a place where you stay, a place to remain; which is something that Jesus said over and over again, that he wants to remain in us and us to remain in him. So he says "in my Father's house there are many dwelling places and I'm going to prepare a place for you, that I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am there you will also be."

Now what is he talking about here? Well on one level he's just talking about the fact that he's going to die, be raised and ascend into heaven; and then one day he will return in the second coming to take his people to be with him. But on another level, in a first century Jewish setting, the imagery here is really evocative because he is also using the language that would have been associated with the Jewish bridegroom. I go through this in my book *Jesus the Bridegroom* in a lot more detail. There what I tried to show was that one of the customs of a bridegroom is that when the bridegroom and bride in Judaism would be betrothed, they would not immediately live together. They would be legally married but the bridegroom and

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

bride would be separated for some time while the bridegroom would go off and do certain things to prepare. Among other things would be to build a home, to build a house for the bride. And the wedding ceremony was really the procession of carrying the bride into the bridegroom's home so that the marriage could be consummated. So one of the interesting things — it is like a subtext — is that Jesus is describing himself as the bridegroom, the disciples collectively as the Church, which is his bride, and then heaven is his Father's house.

So just like a Jewish bridegroom would go, prepare a home, and bring his bride to his Father's house — because he would live on his father's land, he would have a home in his father's territory, the family land — so too Christ is now promising the apostles, he's telling them, he's exhorting them I should say, not to be troubled that he's leaving, because just like a bridegroom, he is going to return and bring the Church to himself to be in the heavenly promised land, in the heavenly home with the Father in the life of the Trinity, in the life of heaven. Now once he says this, Thomas says “well we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way?” So they don't quite get what he means about the Father's house and that kind of thing. So Jesus clarifies by a statement where he says “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.”

Now this is one of Jesus's most famous statements in all the Gospels: “I am the way, and the truth, and life.” And again most people, I think, understand the basic meaning of it, which is that Jesus is the only path to salvation, that he is the sole savior of the world, that he alone can give eternal life. But I think that in this case there is a little more that we can say about this by looking at the Greek here. When Jesus says “I am the way,” the Greek word that he uses here is *hodos*, which literally means a path or road right. And we found this imagery elsewhere in the Gospels, like in the Gospel of Matthew, when he talks about the road to heaven or the road to hell. So in other words he says that “the path to eternal life is narrow and difficult and few are they who find it, but the path to destruction is wide and easy and many are they who find it.” He says that in Matthew 7. So the imagery

of being the way is simply that of a road that leads you to salvation, that leads you to heaven.

But in this case, notice here, heaven is not just like a kind of invisible Disneyland in the sky. Sometimes people think of heaven that way. It is just like this perfect place with lots of clouds and maybe a dry ice machine — kind of like the Hollywood version of heaven. But Jesus' vision of heaven here is what? It is the life of the Trinity. That's why he says "I am the way and no one comes to the Father but by me." So what road is he describing? He is talking about the road to heaven, meaning the road to the Trinity, the road to the Father, the road to life with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That is the essence of heaven for him. And he says "I am the truth." In other words, I have the fullness of the truth. If you look around in our own day, there are so many different religions, so many different cultures and context, and lots of them have little parts of the truth. There are lots of truth and goodness and beauty in the various major religions of the world. But Jesus isn't just a piece of the truth, he doesn't just have some of the truth, he has all of the truth, because he is the truth. He is the truth come in person. So he is not just the path to heavenly life and life with God, he is also the fullness of the truth made flesh.

And then finally he says "I am the life." Well what is the life he is talking about here? It is not natural life. It is not just biological life. It is not *bios* here — which would be the Greek word for what we call natural life. This is *zōé* in Greek. It is supernatural life, it is eternal life, the life of the Trinity, the life of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So if you want to have natural life there are all kinds of things you can do. You can eat good food, you can drink good drink, you could stay healthy and exercise and keep yourself in shape; but if you want *zōé*, if you want the life of the world to come, if you want the life of the Trinity, there is only one place you can go, and that is Jesus of Nazareth. You have to become his disciple. You have to walk on the path with him, learn the fullness of truth from him and live the life that he lived in order to enter into the life of the Trinity. And he says that here to Thomas in response to his statement, "how do we know the path."

Now you can see that he is talking about the Trinity because in the next verses — if we keep going — how does Philip, another one of the apostles, respond? I love this. This is one of my favorite passages:

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied."

It is almost like "alright, alright, I get all this stuff about the way, could you just show us the unveiled face of God? That is all we really need; we will be happy then." A small request right!? Now Jesus responds:

Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves.

So what's going on here? Well basically Phillip is asking Jesus to give him what we would call the beatific vision, the vision of the unveiled face of God. And if you recall in the Old Testament, over and over again — and the Jews would have known this — you will have someone like Moses say "Lord, show me your glory." And what does God say in response? Man cannot see me and live. So, for example, in Exodus 34 he shows Moses his backside, but he can't show him his face. The same thing with Elijah, he goes up on the mountain and hears all these phenomena, all these wonders: thunder, lightening, and an earthquake. But when he comes out to meet God, God speaks in a still, small voice. But even in the still, small voice, Elijah has to cover his face. So you can't see the unveiled face of God. Phillip is getting a little impatient here and says "just show us the face of God," and Jesus responds by saying "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father, because the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

So once again, notice here the great mystery of the Trinity, that Jesus and the Father are one. And that to see Jesus is, in a sense, to behold the face of the

invisible God, because as son he bears the “image of his Father.” You will see this elsewhere in the New Testament, like in Colossians 1:15. Paul says that “Christ is the image of the invisible God” because the Father never becomes incarnate, but the son does become incarnate. And just like if you look at my son you can see he looks like me. Just like in the natural order the son bears the image of the father, all the more Jesus, as the eternal son of eternal Father in the Trinity, he reveals to us the face of God the Father. So if you've seen him, you have seen God. That's what he's trying to get Philip to understand, the great mystery of the Trinity. Now the final section of the reading for today goes a little bit even further. Jesus ends with this statement to the disciples in verse 12 and following:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father.

I left that verse for last because although it is short, it is really powerful. So what Jesus has just said is “the Father is in me and I am in the Father, and when I come into this world, I came to do the Father’s works.” But it is not just Jesus that does the works of the Father, the disciples are going to do the works of Jesus, they are going to do the works of the Father too. So he says “whoever believes in me will do the works that I do.” But then he says something striking, “greater works than these will he do.” Now you can imagine the apostles sitting there at the Last Supper thinking he was exaggerating. Like “maybe this was one of his hyperboles,” like “cut off your hand” or “pluck out your eye” or something like that.

How can Jesus say that anyone else would be able to do greater works than him? Think about it, if you go back to the Gospel of John what has he done? He turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana, he healed a centurion’s son, he multiplied bread, he feed 5000 people in the wilderness with bread from five loaves and a couple of fish. So he had the multiplication of the loaves, he had the changing of water into wine at Cana, he had the walking on water in John 6, the healing of the man born blind in John 9. All of these miracles and signs that he's performed and

now he gets to the end of his life and he tells the apostles “you are doing to do greater works than these. Whoever believes in me will do greater works.”

Now on one hand it might sound like he is exaggerating, however on the other hand, if you think about it, what is he going to do when he “goes to the Father?” Well, he is going to ascend, he is going to die and rise again. He ascends into heaven and then he sends the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is going to empower the apostles not just to perform the kind of visible and material miracles that Jesus performed, like changing water into wine or healing the man born blind or feeding the multitudes in the desert; the Holy Spirit is going to empower the apostles to forgive sins like we saw in John 20, the power of confession. The Holy Spirit is going to empower the apostles to perform the Sacrament of Baptism, where Original Sin and the people’s sins are wiped away and they are made temples of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is going to empower the apostles to change bread and wine into the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ.

In other words, the greater works that the apostles will perform are the sacraments. Because although for most of us, we are more amazed by the visible, material miracles that Jesus performed in his lifetime, Jesus is more correct to say that the Sacraments are actually greater miracles. Because what Jesus does during his public ministry visibly through his visible miracles, is going to point forward to what God will do in the apostles through the Holy Spirit invisibly in the mysteries of the Sacraments. And you might think, “that is kind of strong Dr. Pitre, how could you say that?” Well let me just give you an example here. St. Thomas Aquinas, when he was writing a commentary on this particular passage, this Gospel today from the Gospel of John, St. Thomas Aquinas says that:

What is remarkable is that he adds, “and greater works than these will he do” (John14:12)... Christ is speaking of this result or work when he says that believers “will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do” (John 14:12), for the justification of the wicked is a greater work than the creation of heaven and earth. For the justification of the wicked,

considered in itself, continues forever... But the heavens and the earth will pass away...²

That is St. Thomas Aquinas' commentary, and he is actually quoting St. Augustine's commentary on the Gospel of John as well, which is also quoted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1994. So this is kind of a standard stream of tradition in the Catholic Church, that John 14 is Jesus promising the disciples not only that he would be the road to salvation, but that that road is going to take the particular shape of the Sacraments of the Church. And if you pull back for a second and think about it, it makes sense. Take the Sacrament of Confession. If a priest hears the confession of a person who is in mortal sin and that person is forgiven, there's a real sense in which that one act of hearing a confession is a greater work than the creation of the whole universe. Because the universe, the heaven and earth, are going to pass away. They are finite, they are temporary. But the eternal life given to a person, to the justification of someone as St. Augustine says here, making someone righteous, that lasts forever, that's eternal. So Baptism, the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Confession; these are actually greater miracles than what Jesus did during his earthly ministry. And the Apostles and their successors are going to do them through the power of the Holy Spirit. That is why Jesus says "I have to return to my Father so that you can do these greater works." Because when he goes to the Father he will send the Spirit. This is an awesome passage from the Gospel of John. It is so rich, both in Christology, and also in sacramental theology, the theology of the Sacraments.

And speaking of the Sacraments, we can turn back to the first reading for today. This is from Acts 6:1-7. This is the famous story of the choosing of the seven righteous men to be what later would go on to be called deacons. So let's look at the story for just a minute together. The first readings says this:

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 1900, vol. 3, p. 66; quoting Augustine, In. Jo. Evan. 72.3; cf. CCC 1994

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Proch'orus, and Nica'nor, and Ti'mon, and Par'menas, and Nicola'us, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

So what is this describing? Well basically it's another example of the Church, during the Easter season, giving us a window on the early days of Christianity, on the birth of the Church as described in the book of Acts. And just like we've seen Peter preaching and the administration of the Sacrament of Baptism, so now, from the Acts of the Apostles, we get a description of the origin of the Sacrament of the Diaconate, of the first level of what we call Holy Orders. So what was the origin of this? Well what happened was there were two factions in the Jerusalem Church. There were the Hellenists (this was a word for Greek speaking Jewish Christians; like Jews who lived in Jerusalem but who spoke Greek) and then the Hebrews, who were were Hebrew or Aramaic — that is debated — speaking Jewish Christians as well. And these two different linguistic groups are struggling with one another because some of the widows of the Greek speaking ones are being neglected in the daily distribution of food and clothing and things like that, which would be particularly important for widows because they didn't have any source of income.

So they are bringing this to the apostles and the apostles basically say “look, our apostolic ministry of the word and prayer is taking all of our time. We need men who will be appointed to assist us with particularly the ministry of charity.” In other words, ministering and serving those who were poor or who were in need. So they choose these seven men and they lay hands on them and appoint them to that task. Now in a first century Jewish context, this is very, very important, the laying on of hands was a rite. It was a well-established rite that was used in the Old Testament to appoint men either to the priesthood, like the sons of Aaron, or to being Levites, who were ministers who assisted the priests in the Temple. So in the Old Testament you had basically three levels of ministry in the Temple. You had the high priest, Aaron and his descendants, then you had the priests who were within the family of Aaron and then you had the Levites, which were the rest of the tribe of Levi; and they would assist the priests in the Temple. They didn’t offer sacrifice themselves, but they helped with the ministry of Temple service.

The same thing happens in the New Testament Church. The Apostles here appoint these seven men to function much like the Levites did in the Old Testament, to be assistants to the apostles and their ministry. And in this case, the Greek word here when Peter says “to *serve* tables” is *diakoneō*, and we get the word deacon from that. In fact, later on in Paul's letters, like 1 Timothy 3, these men are going to be called *diakonos*. So they are going to be called deacons. That's the origin of today what we call the diaconate. So the choosing of the seven deacons here represents for us a very interesting and important window into the ministry of deacons in the early Church. Deacons have been part of the Church from the beginning and note well here that an essential part of diaconal ministry is the ministry of charity, the ministry to the poor and the ministry to the needy within the Christian community.

So those are the major readings for today. The Responsorial Psalm for today is a more general Psalm just again asking and invoking the Lord to pour out his mercy upon the church. This is Psalm 33, “Lord, let your mercy be upon us, as we place our hope [trust] in you.” I would just bring this to a close by highlighting here the significance of what we are seeing in the early Church. In this early Church we are

seeing a recognition of two things: the importance of the sacraments, that's been very clear so far from the book of Acts (baptism and now the diaconate), but also the importance of Jesus as the sole savior of the world. In our own day and time it can be a bit challenging because there are so many different religions, so many different denominations. We live in a pluralistic world where many people from many cultures and religions make many different claims about salvation, about the truth, about religious truth and religious identity; and so one of the things that is important to note is that John 14, by giving us this reading this week, the Church is calling us once again to emphasize that Christ, and Christ alone, is the fullness of salvation, is the way of truth, is the way to eternal life. And the Catechism has a great paragraph on this in paragraph 661, where it actually draws on this Gospel reading to emphasize that Jesus is the sole savior of the world, and this is what it says:

Left to its own natural powers humanity does not have access to the “Father’s house,” to God’s life and happiness. Only Christ can open to man such access that we, his members, might have confidence that we too shall go where he, our Head and our Source, has preceded us.³

So why is that important? Well I just want to emphasize that if heaven really is what Jesus said it is in the Gospel for today, if heaven is the life of the Trinity, then that means that heaven is not just a place of natural happiness that we can get to by doing good things and earning a spot in the heavenly realm. No, there's nothing we can do that can earn our admission into the glorious supernatural life of the Trinity, the life and love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If we are going to be led into the life of the Trinity, one of the members of Trinity — namely the son himself — has to come to us and lead us home. He has to give us the grace — through another person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit — to be a member of his body, of his mystical body, which is the Church, so that we can share in the vision of the Father, the unveiled face of the Father forever and ever. That is not something we can earn by

³ CCC, n. 661.

our natural powers as the Catechism puts it, by doing good deeds. The only way to eternal life is through and by the Son in the Spirit who leads us to see Father forever and ever and ever in what we call the beatific vision. And that's what the Church is preparing us for this Fifth Sunday of Easter. It is preparing us for the great gift of the Holy Spirit who will come at Pentecost.