

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 4:8-12
<i>Response</i>	The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 3:1-2
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me
<i>Gospel</i>	John 10:11-18

The fourth Sunday of Easter for year B with the second reading continues our journey through 1 John, the first epistle of John. And it looks at 1 John chapter 3, verses 1-2. So it's a very brief passage, but it's an extremely important passage, very consequential passage, because it's one of the few texts in the New Testament that uses the language of vision to describe the glory of eternal life...what we would call the Beatific Vision. So 1 John chapter 3, verse 1 says this:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.¹

Alright, so what's going on in this passage? Well, first we see a standard theme of John's letter, which is the *agape* of God, the love of God poured out for the salvation of the world. So he says:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.

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.

Now I want you to pause there for a second, because this is a very countercultural — or counterintuitive — statement on John’s part. It’s at odds with the way we speak today. So in our contemporary climate, it’s become very popular to say, “Well, everyone is a child of God.” There’s an emphasis on the universal dignity of the human person, and one of the ways that emphasis is often expressed is through the image of being children of God or being brothers and sisters — like the universal brotherhood of mankind and the emphasis on every human being being a child of God.

And of course, that’s true, in the sense that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, that every human being bears within themselves an immortal soul, human will, and intellect, that images God and comes from God because the human soul is created directly and immediately by God at the moment of conception. That’s common Catholic doctrine. So by way of analogy, just as a father gives life (natural life) to his child, so too every human being receives its life from God the creator and is therefore, in a certain sense, a child of God...just in the natural order.

But when John is speaking here about being children of God, that’s not the way he’s using it. He’s not just talking about the reception of natural life in the order of creation. He’s talking about the reception of supernatural life in the order of redemption, the life that is won — eternal life — that is won for us through the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ that he mentions in the opening chapter of the letter.

So in John’s theology, both in the Gospel of John and in the letters of John, in Johannine theology, you’ll see...that according to John, everyone who was born into the world is under the power of the devil. So in the Gospel of John, Jesus calls the prince of this world the devil — or should I say, He uses the language of the prince of this world to refer to the devil. And the same thing is true in the letter of John. If you look at the letter of John very carefully, you will see, if you go down, for example, to 1 John chapter 5, verse 19, he says:

We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one.

Now pause there for a second. That is the most anti-modern thing John could ever say. Modern people do not go around thinking the whole world is in the power of the evil one. We tend — especially in recent times — to emphasize the goodness of creation, to emphasize the goodness of the world. And that's all certainly true. In itself, the world is good, but the world is also fallen. And so John has a very strong sense and emphasis on the fallenness of the world and the fact that after creation, although God created the world good, it fell into sin through the sin of the first man and the first woman. And because of that sin, the whole world is now under the dominion and under the power of the evil one.

So for John, when he's talking about becoming children of God, he means the fact that through the death of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are now delivered from the power of the evil one and given the supernatural life that Jesus possesses as the Son of God, we're made sharers of that and are children of God in the strictly theological sense, not just the ontological sense of being creatures of God.

I know that might sound a little technical, but it's just really important. Because one of the reasons the Sacrament of Baptism is so poorly understood today is that the Church proclaims that in Baptism, you're made a child of God. And for a modern person, that can seem a little lame, frankly, and a little redundant. Because if everyone's a child of God, and then through Baptism I'm made a child of God, then what exactly did Baptism give me?

If we don't make the distinction between the natural life of our bodies and souls as a union that God gives us at the moment of our conception, and then the supernatural life of the Trinity that dwells within us through the gift of Baptism and the gift of grace, we're not going to see the significance of Baptism clearly. And we're not going to understand there are children of God in the ontological sense, and then there are children of God in the sense that we will live with God for all eternity, and we're no longer under the power of the devil. We are in Christ.

We abide in Christ, and as John is going to go on to say, in the Resurrection we will see God as He is. It's the inheritance that His children will have — eternal life.

So there are different levels of meaning operating here. So John here is saying:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.

So there's the dignity of being made sons in the Son, being made members of Christ. That's what John is celebrating here, that this is already the case. And then he says:

The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

See that language of the world? Whenever John talks about the world, he frequently uses it to describe not just the material world but the world insofar as it is under the power of evil and under the power of the evil one. So he says the world doesn't know us. It doesn't recognize us as children of God, because it didn't know the One who was the natural Son of God, the eternal Son of God — namely, Jesus Christ — who came into this world, who gave Himself for the sake of this world, but was rejected by the world. And the world did not know Him. So then he says:

Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

So notice there, two elements here. What John is talking about first is the appearance of Christ. Now what does that mean? When John speaks about the appearance of Christ, he's referring to the same reality that Paul will call the *parousia*, the coming of Christ, the presence of Christ. So he's speaking about the second coming at the end of time, the final resurrection of the dead. So he's saying when Christ appears, we shall be like him. We're going to be conformed to His image, conformed to His righteousness, conformed to His life. But there's going to

be one added gift. We not only will be like Him again, but we shall see Him as He is.

There's so much Jewish language going on in the letter of 1 John. It's fascinating, because the Greek of this letter is very, very simple. Yet, it's also very Semitic in the way he thinks and the way he speaks. So when he says:

...we shall be like him...

Any first century Jew hearing the language of likeness will think of Genesis chapter 1, because it says in Genesis 1 that at the beginning of the sixth day when God is creating human beings — I can just quote it, Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..."

So the idea of image and likeness are two attributes of humanity that reflect their relationship with God. And if you read the early Church Fathers and Doctors, many Fathers and Doctors will say that what happens when human beings sin, is that they retain the image of God. You still have an immortal soul. We're still a rational creature. But we, in a sense, mar the likeness of God. We obscure it through our sinfulness. We act in ways that don't look like a child of God should act. We don't image the Father. We don't act like our creator, who is good and all powerful and all those things.

And so precisely what Christ comes to do in His Incarnation is, in a sense, to restore that likeness, to teach us (as John will say in 1 John chapter 2) to walk in the way that He walked, to imitate His virtues, to imitate His moral life, to be like Him...not just in the sense that we live forever but in a sense that we're good forever, which is something to look forward to.

So when Christ comes, we will be made like Him, *and* we will also see Him as He is. Now that image there is something very, very powerful. And it's something that, if you think about it, is a bit of an echo of the Gospel here. If you go back to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, there's one episode in which the apostles get a glimpse of the glory. And you get the sense that they *see* Jesus not just in His

human nature but in His divine glory and power. And it's the episode of the Transfiguration.

So in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus ascends the mountain and His face becomes dazzling white. His garments are white. And the apostles — James and Peter and John — are awestruck by the glory that's unveiled in the Transfiguration of Jesus. They don't just see Jesus in His humanity. They see Him in His divine power and glory and majesty. They see Him as He is in the fullness of that truth for that mystery.

And so John here — I can't help but wonder, if when He talks about seeing Him as He is, if He is also echoing that manifestation of Christ during His public ministry as fully human, but also in the glory of the Transfiguration. And I say that because if you go back to the beginning of the letter, right at the beginning of 1 John, listen to what it says:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete.

You get the sense from the opening verses that John and the apostles — the “we,” that authoritative “we” — have seen something which the people to whom he's writing haven't seen. And in fact, if you go back to the beginning of the Gospel of John, it actually says in chapter 1, verse 14:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.

So some interpreters have actually argued that both of those references — “we have beheld his glory” and this opening line of the letter about seeing with our own

eyes that which is from the beginning (in other words, not just as human nature but His divine glory that was from the beginning) — that both of those are allusions to the Transfiguration, which John and Peter and James are the sole witnesses to in the Gospel.

So if that's correct, when John says then that all of us are children of God (those are in Christ) but when Christ appears in glory at the *parousia*, we all shall see Him as He is. He's revealing to them that in a certain sense, the Transfiguration on the mountain, which was beheld only by Peter, James, and John, is a foretaste — or better, a glimpse for sight, an anticipatory vision — of what everyone will see at the *parousia*...Christ coming not just in fullness of humanity but in fullness of the glory of His divinity.

And that image of seeing is something that John uses in the Johannine literature to describe eternal life. So when you think about eternal life, if you imagine the glories of the Resurrection, what aspect of the Resurrection and of eternal life is for you is the heart of it? What attracts you to it the most? What do you most anticipate? Well, if you look at the letters, the Gospel, and the Apocalypse of John (the last book of the New Testament), the theme that runs through all of them is the theme of vision. It's the vision of God that we most long for. It's the vision of God that's the consummation and the climax of eternal life. And you can see this in — if you just turn to Revelation 22. How does John describe eternal life?

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city....

And you skip down to verse 3, he says:

There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face...

That vision of the unveiled face and the glory of God is commonly known as the Beatific Vision, the happy vision of the blessed in Heaven. And that's what John is

describing here — that right now we're His children. That's already realized. But we aren't yet perfectly like unto Him, and we don't yet see Him as He is. So there's the hope of our being configured to Christ, and then there's faith, the trust — and these overlap, obviously — in things that we can't yet see. We believe that we will see Him one day as He is, face to face. And that hope and that faith, that trust that vision will one day come to pass, is of course the foundation. This text is the foundation for the doctrine — the Church's doctrine of the Beatific Vision.

And the doctrine of the Beatific Vision is this, is that at the very heart of the bliss of Heaven is the vision of the unveiled face of God. And in the 14th century and in the early Middle Ages, there was actually debate over whether the vision of God (the Beatific Vision) was something that would only take place at the *parousia*, at the second coming or whether the souls of the saints in Heaven already taste it now...whether they could already see God now.

And in 1336, Pope Benedict XII actually dogmatically defined the doctrine of the Church on this matter with the bull *Benedictus Deus*. And this is the doctrine of the Church on this matter, and I'll close with this quote from the living tradition. Okay, so here's the quote from Benedict XII. It's kind of complicated Latin. Just follow along with me, and listen as carefully as you can:

By virtue of our apostolic authority, we define the following: According to the general disposition of God, the souls of all the saints ... and other faithful who died after receiving Christ's holy Baptism (provided they were not in need of purification when they died, ... or, if they then did need or will need some purification, when they have been purified after death, ...) already before they take up their bodies again and before the general judgment—and this since the Ascension of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into heaven—have been, are and will be in heaven, in the heavenly Kingdom and celestial paradise with Christ, joined to the company of the holy angels. Since the Passion and death of our Lord Jesus Christ, these souls have seen and do see the divine essence with an intuitive vision, and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature.²

² Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* [A.D. 1336]

In closing, then, what is Benedict saying? What he's saying is that the reality that John describes and that we are celebrating here on the fourth Sunday of Easter — the glory that the Resurrection of Christ wins for us — is the possibility of being made like unto Him and seeing Him face to face. And so what Benedict is saying is we don't have to wait until the *parousia* to see God face to face. If after death, we are thoroughly purified from any sin — any effects of sin, any venial sin, for example, in the fires of purgatory — once that purification, that final purification is complete, the blessed who are in Heaven don't have to wait until the Resurrection to see God face to face. But they see Him in His essence, as He is right now, without the mediation of any creature.

And that's a glorious and great mystery. It's the mystery of eschatology. It is the mystery of the hope of the Christian faith, and it's the mystery that Paul, in his letters, describes with those beautiful words:

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him...”