

The Second Sunday of Easter

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 4:32-35
<i>Response</i>	O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures for ever!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 John 5:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”
<i>Gospel</i>	John 20:19-31

The second Sunday of Easter for year B takes us to the first epistle of St. John — chapter 5, verses 1 through 6 — in a very well known but also somewhat mysterious passage about the commandments of God and the blood of Jesus Christ. So you might be thinking, “Why are we reading this during the Easter season?” But we’ll walk through it, and I’ll try to unpack for you what I think might be the reason for that and also what this mysterious passage means. So this is what it says:

Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and every one who loves the parent loves the child. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth.¹

So you can see there, there are a number of elements in that passage, some of which are pretty straightforward and some of which are rather mysterious or even a little bit enigmatic and opaque. So we'll just kind of walk through it together and unpack them.

The passage opens with fairly basic clear statements about faith, about our relationship with God in Christ, and also about the importance of keeping the commandments. So it says there:

Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God, and every one who loves the parent loves the child.

Okay, so first there — notice the terminology “Jesus is the Christ.” This reflects the very Semitic character of the Johannine letters in the New Testament. So although the first letter of John is written in Greek, there's a Semitic mindset to it, and you see that reflected in the language of “the Christ,” *ho christos*. That's a Greek translation of *ha masiah* or “the Anointed One,” the Messiah. So it's just another example of the fact that in the New Testament, Christ is not the surname of Jesus. It's not His last name; it's a title. And you can see that very clearly where the definite article is attached to it, that Jesus is the Messiah.

So what John is saying here is that everyone who believes Jesus is the Messiah is a child of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. So love for the Father leads to love for the Son and vice versa. Love for the Son leads to love for the Father. So one of the things that this letter appears to be written against — and there's a lot of debate about who the opponents are in the letter 1 John — is people who are denying that Jesus is in fact the Messiah, that He is in fact the Christ. And so this is His way of emphasizing that if you deny Jesus is the Messiah (as he says

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.

elsewhere), you can't really love God the Father, and vice versa. So he's saying whoever loves the parent here is also going to love the child.

In other words, if you really love God, then you shouldn't deny that Jesus is the Messiah, because He is the Son of the God whom you claim to love. And you can kind of see with that in mind — and many scholars have suggested this — that unlike, say, the letters of Paul, some of which might have written to address specifically Gentile concerns or Gentile problems in his Gentile churches, a number of scholars have suggested that 1 John is written to Jewish Christians and dealing with some problems in Jewish Christian communities...one of which would have been some Jewish people who are followers of the Scriptures, followers of the law of Moses, rejecting the Messiahship of Jesus, saying that He's not the Messiah. And John is trying to trace out those implications. Another point he says is:

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. (1 John 5:2-3a)

So the second point here is on the importance of keeping the commandments, which again, you can see how as the Gospel spread throughout the Mediterranean world, and you've got people like the apostle Paul saying that in order to be saved, you don't have to be circumcised — or not just the apostle Paul, the apostle John. There's a council in Jerusalem in 49 AD where Peter and John and the other apostles, along with Paul, meet and decide that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised in order to be saved. You can see this in Acts chapter 15.

Well, you could see easily how among some Jews, that might be cause for concern. It might sound like we're abandoning the law of God; we're abandoning the commandments of God. We don't have to keep circumcision? What other commandments are we not obligated to keep? So John here, we see emphasizes — this may be a reason why he emphasizes, but he certainly emphasizes — that no, followers of Christ (as followers of Christ) we keep the commandments. That's how we show our love of God.

So keeping the commandments is not optional for those who are in Christ. In fact, as he says:

For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. (1 John 5:3a)

That might be a little of a counterintuitive thing for us to hear, because modern people tend to think of the commandments primarily as extrinsic rules that we either keep or we violate...we either keep or we break. What John says here is, of course that's true. There's a deeper level, though, of understanding the commandments here that the commandments at the end of the day are not rules to be kept. They are the ways we love God or love our neighbor.

In fact, going all the way back to St. Augustine in the 5th century (early 5th century) in one of his classic treatises on questions about the book of Exodus, he divides up the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. The first three are regarding love of God, and then the second set of seven is regarding the love of neighbor. He kind of walks through each of those, and he says how they have to do with love.

And you can see that Augustine is not making this up, because if you go back to Exodus 20, the very first commandment against idolatry, God says, "I will punish those who commit idolatry...":

...upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exodus 20:5b-6)

That's Exodus 20:6. So notice, when God describes the reason for either breaking or keeping the commandments against idolatry and blasphemy and Sabbath observance or honoring your father and mother, the reason He gives is it's a question of love or hate. So if you love God, you will avoid idolatry. You won't take His name in vain. You will keep holy the Sabbath...and so on and so forth. And if you hate God — that's the antithesis that He gives — then you'll worship idols and you'll blaspheme and you won't rest or honor the Sabbath. John is presupposing that as a Jew. He knows Exodus 20. He knows it's about love — love

or hate, at the end of the day. And he's proposing that to his audience...that if this is love...if you want to love God, then keep His commandments.

So the upshot of that, the implication is if you worship idols, you don't love God. If you blaspheme, if you take His name in vain, then you don't love Him. If you won't rest on the Sabbath, if you don't honor the Sabbath Day, then you don't love God. You love your work. You love your wealth. You love your pursuits...but you don't love God. So the commandments are not extrinsic rules. They really are intrinsic signs of where a person's heart is. It's a more...this is John, right? It's a more mystical way of reading the Sacraments. If I want to be in love with God, I'll keep the commandments, because keeping the commandments keeps me united to God. It keeps me in the *agape* of God, the love of God.

And he says this isn't burdensome. These commandments are not burdensome. Far from being external rules that have to bear about and carry about, love is not a burden. It should be a joy to show love. And then he says:

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. (1 John 5:4)

Whenever we read the letters of John, remember that "the world" has several different meanings. It can mean this visible, material world. But often John uses it to describe the realm in the visible and invisible world that is opposed to God. So the things of the world are the things that lead us to sin. People who belong to the world are people who have rejected God. The spirit of this world are evil spirits that lead us away from God. The prince of this world, according to Jesus in the Gospel of John, is Satan. He's the prince of this world. So here 1 John is talking about that whoever is born of God, which is an image of Baptism...

...overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

You can kind of see that John's concern or the error that John appears to be concerned with correcting is the denial of the Messiahship of Jesus and the denial

of the divine Sonship of Jesus. And both these things would have been questions and problems that would have been raised — and perhaps even debated and fought over — as the Gospel spread through early Jewish Christianity...as the Jewish Christian Church spread and the Gospel is preached in synagogues and that kind of thing. So there's good reason to think that as the Gospel was proclaimed in synagogues that people would raise objections: "How do we know this Jesus is the Christ? And what do you mean to say He's the Son of God?" So you see John here responding to that by affirming those articles of faith, the centrality of those articles of faith.

And just as a side note...you just might — in support of what I'm suggesting here in terms of the reading of the text. You might go back to Galatians 2 and just recall for a minute that when Paul went to Jerusalem and he met with the pillars of the Church in Jerusalem — who were James and Cephas and John, remember that? — in Galatians 2, Paul says:

...and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised...

So you see, according to Paul, there was a division of labor, a division of mission. Paul would be the apostle to the Gentiles, but Peter and James *and* John would be apostles to the Jews. This is another reason why a number of contemporary scholars think that whereas Paul's letters are predominantly written to Gentile Christian audiences, the Catholic epistles of Peter and James and John and Jude are primarily written to Jewish Christian audiences, so that both collections of letters reflect the two spheres — social spheres and cultural spheres and ethnic groups — to which the Gospel came in different ways through the various missions of the apostles. I think that's a compelling reading of 1 John. It makes sense of why he's emphasizing what to us sometimes seems like basic truths. Well, of course you have to keep the commandments. Of course Jesus is the Christ, and of course He's the Son of God. Why would anyone ever object? Well, those are live issues as the Good News was being proclaimed in Jewish synagogues in the first decades of the early Church.

Alright, so what about this last line, in closing?

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. (1 John 5:6)

Very cryptic saying. You can tell John seems to expect his audience to understand what he means. Evidently, somebody is out there saying, “Jesus just came with water and not with blood.” And John is saying, “No, He came with the water, but not the water only — the water *and* the blood.” And you’re thinking, “Okay...what does that mean? What is he referring to?” And this is a great example of how something that can be opaque to us or obscure if we read the text in isolation can have some light shed on it if we go to its most ancient interpreters — the early Church Fathers.

In this case, I’d turn to one of the most ancient we have, and that’s St. Irenaeus of Lyons. So Irenaeus was writing in the late second century about 180 AD, and he was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John, of the apostle John — sometimes called John the Elder. We can go into that in another video. And anyway, Irenaeus gives us a profile of one of the early heretics named Cerinthus and his followers and what they were denying about Christ.

And if you look at the letter of 1 John as being written against the Cerinthians — which is a heresy nobody remembers anymore but which was very prominent in Irenaeus’ day — you can see an explanation emerges. So listen to these words. This is from St. Irenaeus of Lyons. It’s in the second century. He’s only one generation removed from the apostle John himself, and this is what he says about this man Cerinthus and his followers:

Cerinthus, again, a man who was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians, taught that the world was not made by the primary God, but by a certain Power far separated from him, and at a distance from that Principality who is supreme over the universe, and ignorant of him who is above all. *He represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation,*

while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent, and wise than other men. Moreover, after his baptism...

...this is according to Cerinthus...

...Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.²

That's from Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 1, paragraph 26. And you can also find out about Cerinthus and his followers, the Cerinthians — who are not the same as the Corinthians — in the works of Epiphanius. Epiphanius wrote a famous book called the *Panarion*. It's the basket...it's a basket of heresies, and it's about 600 pages — big basket.

Anyway, so...what's Irenaeus saying there? Well, Irenaeus gives us a possible clue. According to several of the early Church Fathers, the letters of John (and even the Gospel) was actually written against Cerinthus and some other Jewish groups, like the Ebionites, who were denying certain basic truths about Jesus. First, Cerinthus denied that Jesus was born of a virgin. So in other words, he was effectively denying the divinity of Jesus by denying His virginal conception.

And then second, even more interesting for 1 John here, Cerinthus claimed that the Spirit — which he calls the Christ, the Anointing — came upon Jesus at His Baptism, but then before His crucifixion the Spirit of the Christ departed from Jesus so that He suffered and died. And the reason he argued that is because he wanted to argue that the Christ Himself remained impassible in as much as He was a spiritual being, so He couldn't suffer.

So some people like Cerinthus were struggling with the idea of a crucified Son of God. How can Jesus be divine and yet at the same time suffer? And so Cerinthus'

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.26; trans. ANF, 1.351-52; cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.4; 3.11.1; Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.28.6; 4.14.6; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 28

solution was, “Ah, well He had the divine Spirit that came upon Him at His Baptism, but that same Spirit departed before the suffering began in the Passion.” So this is a way of preserving the divine impassibility of Christ.

What does John say? No, no, no, no, no. He says that not only is Jesus the Son of God but that:

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. (1 John 5:6)

In other words, to put it in our words, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, came with His Baptism and the Cross — not just the Baptism but the Cross also. In other words, according to John, both Jesus’ Baptism and His Passion and death reveal that He is the Christ, the Son of God. The fact that He suffered and poured out His blood is not in any way a detraction. It doesn’t take away from His identity as the Son of God. Instead, it actually establishes and reveals His identity, both through His Baptism and through His Passion.

And this is going to be a problem. You’ll see this not just with the Cerinthians but with other early heretics who, in order to preserve the divinity of Jesus, they want to make it as if He didn’t really suffer on the Cross, because they can’t wrap their brains around the idea of a suffering God...because they haven’t fully yet grasped the mystery of the Incarnation — that He’s not only full divine, but He’s fully human and that it’s in His human nature that He suffers as a divine person with a fully human nature. So those details of the mystery of the Incarnation are still being worked out. And so we see John here — possibly, this is my interpretation — responding to that kind of error in the early Church and insisting, “Not only did Jesus come with the water, but He came with the blood.” And who is it that testifies that that’s true? He ends:

And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth. (1 John 5:7)

And what’s fascinating is if you go back to the Gospel of John, what you’ll see is that at the Baptism of Jesus in the beginning of the Gospel of John, it’s the Holy

Spirit who bears witness that Christ is the Son of God. And then on the Cross, it says Jesus, when His hour had come:

...bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30b)

So the Spirit is present both at the Baptism *and* at the Cross. And they both bear witness to the mystery of Jesus' identity not just as the Messiah but as the divine Son of God. And that's really what we're celebrating during Easter. It's not just the mystery of His Passion and His death (in the Paschal Mystery) but of His Resurrection through the power of the Holy Spirit, which now impels all of the apostles — John included — to bear witness to the nations that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God.