

Homily for the 6th Sunday of Easter

Over this Easter season, I've really been getting into the 1st Letter of Peter. The letters of Peter, along with the letters of John, James, and Jude form the latter part of the New Testament called the Catholic Epistles or Letters. Why catholic? Well, that word 'catholic' with a lower-case "c" means universal. Just like the Roman Catholic Church is the universal Christian Church found all throughout the world that is centered in Rome! Well, these books are considered catholic, because they were not addressed to a particular community, like Paul's letters were – for example, to the Christians in Corinth, the Corinthians. Rather, the Catholic Letters were addressed to all Christians in general.

Well anyway, I heard the first verse of our second reading today from I Peter – “Beloved, Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.” I heard that, and I thought to myself, “Now what does that mean?” So, I did a little research. The word 'sanctify' is just a fancy word that means “to make holy”. And 'holy' just means “set apart for a sacred purpose”. So, how does that help? Well, it means that St. Peter is exhorting us as Christians to set apart in our hearts that rightful place for Jesus to truly be Lord. In other words, we are told to make Jesus the Lord of our hearts. But, what does it mean for Jesus to be Lord? Well, a “lord” is “one who has control of a person; their master”. So, is Jesus the “master” of your heart? Is He the One who has control of you? Do you know that Jesus can be your Savior, and yet not be the Lord of your heart? And that causes all kinds of problems, because it means we have a double life!

But, let's just suppose that Jesus *is* the Lord of our hearts. What would that look like? Well, He says in our Gospel today, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." So, if He's the One who has control of us, then that means we keep His commandments – all of them, always! But how can we possibly keep God's commandments as Christ taught us? I mean, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"! You know, sometimes we have great intentions: I want to pray more. I want to give up that bad habit. I want to take my faith more seriously. And, as much as we might have good intentions, what happens? We fall flat. We give up. We say, "I'm just too tired" or "It's just too hard". So, where can we get the strength from to maintain our resolve and keep God's commandments so that Jesus can truly be Lord of our hearts?

Well, Jesus gives that answer in the very next verse – the very next verse – in our Gospel passage. He says, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth..." The Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the answer! The Holy Spirit is the one who enthrones Jesus as King and Lord of our hearts. Therefore, He is the One who enables us to keep God's commandments. If we could do it on our own, a) we'd be doing this a lot more often; b) we'd be better at it; and c) we wouldn't need God or His grace in the first place! But, obviously we need God and His help! The Holy Spirit *is* God's help. He's God's very power, who enables us to live and love as Jesus commands us to!

So, how do we make this real? Well, how about the Sacrament of Confirmation? In Confirmation, we are sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, who comes into our lives enriching us with a special strength as believers and disciples. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Confirmation...is the sign that Jesus Christ has marked a Christian with the seal of his Spirit by clothing him with power from on high so that he may be his witness.” Power! That’s who the Holy Spirit is – POWER! But how many of us really got that message at our Confirmation? Unfortunately, probably not too many.

But, it’s never too late. That grace has already been given us in the sacrament however long ago. It may be dormant, but it’s still there! So, if you really want to take your faith seriously, intentionally cultivate a relationship with the Holy Spirit. As you go throughout your day and temptation comes, or fear or doubt is knocking at your door, or one of your bad habits is trying to exert itself, surrender yourself to Jesus, and ask God to send you His Holy Spirit. Directly ask the Holy Spirit to fill you to overflowing, so that God’s Spirit can imbue your spirit so that you can truly and really have the strength needed to keep God’s commandments. This really works. But only if you have faith. This is not magic. God is not a magician. He won’t be manipulated either. Rather, He wants a personal and intimate relationship with each one of us. And if we, like little children, humbly turn to Him and ask Him to do what we cannot do for ourselves, He really will. God bless you.