

HOMILY SUNDAY EASTER 04 – A
“Meeting and Following Jesus”
(Acts 2:14a, 36b-41; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:20-25; Jn 10:1-10)

A French Canadian preacher was asked the secret of his success. His reply was simple: “First, I tell them what I’m going to tell them, then I tell them, then I tell them what I told them.”

Today, we are asked to believe in Jesus and follow him.

The readings today are like that French preacher. They tell us who Jesus is; what we must do, and how to do it.

First, we are told who Jesus is in ringing terms. St. Peter, fresh from the exhilarating experience of Pentecost, proclaims what we could call the very first papal encyclical. It is not at all about liturgical details or what language to pray in. Rather, it is a bold proclamation: Jesus is the Messiah and Lord! Peter raised his voice and addressed the crowd. “Let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

The very first papal pronouncement is all about Jesus. It is an invitation to meet him, to encounter him, to experience him, to believe in him as Messiah and Lord.

This is important. This is crucial. One of the complaints that we hear about the Church today is that many “Catholics” have been sacramentalized but not evangelized. Many of our “members” have been baptized, confirmed, made their first communion, but have never really met or experienced Jesus! Brothers and sisters, how can this be? And how can this be perhaps even the common experience for so many of us?

Today, we are invited to meet Jesus, to learn more deeply who he is. In the Gospel, Jesus introduces himself as the Gate and the Shepherd. Here he is affirming what St. Peter proclaims in the first reading. To be The Gate is the same as being the Messiah. The Messiah was the anointed one, the one sent to liberate humanity from the power of evil, to break open the gates of heaven. That is what Jesus did – by his death and resurrection he overcame the power of death and initiated the reign of God here on earth, right here and now, for those who believe in him. That is why the veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom when he died on the cross. Jesus, as The Gateway, opened up the way into heaven. Now there is no more man-made or even spiritual barrier between humanity and heaven. Let us believe this and live it in our lives!

In the Gospel, Jesus also introduces himself as the Shepherd. Here he is also affirming what St. Peter proclaims in the first reading. To be The Shepherd is the same as being Lord. The Lord is the Risen One who overcame death and now wants to give us this same new eternal life that he enjoys with the Father.

Our invitation, our urgent and important invitation, our life and death invitation, is to believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord; as The Gate and The Good Shepherd, and to surrender our will and our lives to him. Have we done this, my friends? Have we met him, experienced him, let him into our lives? If not, do it now, and life will be yours.

Second, now that we have met Jesus, we are told what we must do. In the first reading, St. Peter is clear. Repent; receive the forgiveness of God through Jesus; live your baptism and you will be filled with the Holy Spirit. In the second reading, Peter asks us to live for righteousness, for by faith in the passion of Jesus, we have been not only forgiven, but also healed. We need not sin again the way we did in the past - we have been transformed! And in the Gospel Jesus simply asks us to follow him, to put our faith in him.

So now back to the French Canadian preacher. We know who Jesus is, and that we are to repent, believe in him and follow him. But how can we do that? How do we live our faith in him?

Jesus as Lord and Shepherd shows us the way. We are to listen to his voice and to obey that voice. We must as Catholics place a whole new emphasis on the Scriptures, on the Word of God. We must read it, ponder it, study it and pray with it, together and alone. That is how we will hear his voice. And we must take time for personal, quiet, meditative prayer, the prayer of contemplation, allowing ourselves the opportunity to hear the stillness of God influence us, speak to us, transform us.

St. Peter in the second reading asks us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus who suffered for us. We are to do what Jesus would do – more, what Jesus did and is still doing in our day, through the Church. Ultimately, we must lean on him and forgive those who hurt us the way Jesus forgave those who ridiculed, abused and crucified him. We must entrust ourselves to him, rely on the power of his Spirit working within us, and break the cycle of violence in our world by forgiveness. That is how we can best love others. That is how we can follow him as our Messiah and Lord, as the Gate and the Good Shepherd.

To live this way is always a challenge, but an exciting and energizing challenge. I remember Rhonda. She was hitch-hiking back home from a stint in jail for breaching her parole, a parole from her first offense of drinking in her community which was a dry reserve. A 26 year old mother of three, her current boyfriend in jail, the father of her children looking after the kids, she tried to make light of her situation, calling it all a 'holiday' but underneath her carefree façade, it was obvious that there was a deep hurt that was probably the source of the drinking. I gently invited her into conversation, and her story began to unfold. She had quit school because her teacher was making sexual advances towards her, and she was afraid to tell anyone. Her mother was still alive, but sickly, and she was afraid she would die soon. Her father died six years earlier. She said she was close to him, but then admitted that he was an alcoholic and used to beat her

mom. Her reaction was to sit still, be quiet and in that sense, she became the 'lost child' and with a laugh, admitted that she still was – lost in alcohol. Then she blurted out that her father used to accuse her of not being his child, and that was when she started drinking, and became a teen-age alcoholic. She admitted that she felt fear, anger, sadness, loss and grief when she remembered her father.

I shared with her my own experience of anger towards my dad, and the process of forgiving him, being reconciled with him, and then the letter expressing my feelings towards him that I wrote and read out loud to him, eleven years after his death, and what a moment of healing that was for both of us. We then arrived where she was getting off I pulled out the small bible that I keep in the car and shared with her Mt 18:15+. In this passage Jesus teaches the necessity of forgiving, and shows us how to do just that. I encouraged her to write a letter to her father as a way of trying to forgive him and being reconciled with him. She said that she had a bible in her pocket, and would try. We parted with a sense of hope filling the car as she went on her way, looking for her next ride.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is in itself a powerful encounter with Jesus for those who believe in him. We let him love us through his forgiveness, first of all. Then we listen to his Word and let it touch us. Finally, he shares his own Body and Blood with us, to heal and transform us. And then we are sent out to bring that love to a very wounded, unbelieving world.

So remember, Jesus is both Messiah and Lord; Gate and Shepherd. Let us believe in him, follow him and love others as he has loved us.