

Keeping Faith In Difficult Times

Texts: Acts 17:22-31

I Peter 3:13-22 (Series A . 6th Sunday of Easter) Psalm 66:8-20

John 14:15-21

Let us pray:

This week's readings begin with reminders of the work of God in Creation, who, in addition to making the world, gave us *life and breath* and *holds our souls in life*. God is known to us, if we open ourselves to discover God's Presence within. While life is often difficult, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, God is with us throughout it all.

Sometimes it is not the separation and divorce of our parents that causes us this kind of pain; sometimes it is something more basic and more universal. Sometimes death robs us, and we are left as orphans. We are left feeling alone, and, though we know better, we can feel betrayed and left, as it were, holding the bag and not knowing what to do.

Such was the situation that Jesus addressed in speaking to his disciples the night before his death. After a long time together - a time in which he nurtured and fed and taught and loved his disciples - he announced to them that he was leaving them to fulfill his destiny – by going to the cross.

It was, and is, a hard thing to grasp - how a person could voluntarily leave those he loves, and the disciples resisted this idea; they did not want Jesus to leave them - they did not want to have to face the future without his guidance and his grace.

In today's reading, Jesus told his disciples that when he left them, he would not leave them as orphans but that he would come back to them; while the rest of the world would not see him again, the disciples **would** see him, and the Spirit of God would abide with them - the Spirit of Counsel, the Spirit of Truth... the Spirit of Love.

"If you love me," he said, "you will obey what I command - and they who love me will be loved by my Father and I, too, will love them and show myself to them." Some things are best appreciated on our knees, and this is one of them. Loving and obeying Christ (even when we don't understand what he is up to; even when we don't understand why he felt he had to leave us, why he had to die) leads

us to an understanding, to a feeling, to a conviction, to an inner certainty that we are not alone. That, in some fashion or other, he is with us and there is comfort in this; there is a sense of wholeness given to us, a sense that there is a light in the darkness, that everything is OK. That, in fact, everything is going to work out well, no matter what happens, no matter what the immediate future may bring to us.

A few years ago, I had a discussion with a young woman who was having all kinds of emotional, relational, and other personal problems. In the course of our conversation, she said, and I quote, "God left me many years ago."

Hmm...I asked her if she was ever baptized; she affirmed that, yes, she had been baptized and was even confirmed in the Catholic Church. "Then, it wasn't God who left you and the relationship," I concluded. "It was you who left!" You see, my friends, this young woman chose a lifestyle outside of the will of God, and it didn't pay off; it left her hurt, broken, and miserable. When we choose the acts, we choose the consequences.

"If you love me", Jesus said, "you will obey what I command - and they who love me will be loved by my Father, and I, too, will love them and show myself to them." The truth about life is revealed to us by the Spirit of truth that Jesus sends to us from the Father - and that truth is love.

- a love expressed and shown to others, in the way God shows love to us.
- a love expressed and shown according to the word sent to us by God from the beginning and incarnated in Christ Jesus, our brother and our Lord. We can't go wrong by following Christ. We can only go right. And, he promises them his Spirit unconditionally; a Spirit that will advocate for them,
 - and comfort them,
 - and lead them,
 - and watch over them.

He promises them that the Spirit of God will live in them. Jesus also tells his disciples that not everyone will receive the Spirit. He tells them that those in the world, those who love only themselves, those who sneer at holy things and scorn the law of God, cannot receive the Spirit... because they do not know the Spirit... because they do not desire it.

The secret of what honouring is and what it involves is found in the command that Jesus gave to his disciples; the command that, not only should we love one another, but that we should love them as he loves us.

The apostle Peter suggests to us that the secret of the spiritual life - the life that gives life's meaning – of the life that is worth living - is found in sanctifying (set apart) in our hearts Jesus as Lord. This means pretty much the same as what Jesus meant, when he said to the disciples, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*"

To sanctify something means:

- to make that thing holy
- to make it special
- to make it different
- to make it wonderful
- to dedicate it to the divine purpose
- to dedicate it to the divine One
- to allow the Spirit to transform it from one degree of glory to another.

Sanctify, in your hearts, Christ as Lord.

Don't just say, "I believe in and love Christ." Show that love! Take the time each day to know him, to treat him as a friend, to talk to him, and to make him special to you. Treat his wishes as your deepest desire, his every suggestion and hint as your life-giving law and your greatest yearning.

To "Sanctify Christ in our hearts as Lord" means:

- to really hold on to him and to hold his word in your awareness.
- to really listen and then to really do.

In a Spiritual sense, love always demands that we give up our lives - that we give up our "selves" willingly. To love as Jesus loves means, quite simply:

- that we will forgive others the pain that they cause us;
 - that we will reach out to bless those who seem indifferent to us, even hostile towards us;
- that we will care even when we do not feel cared for;
- that we will pray for others and seek the best for them.

To love someone else, as Jesus loves us, does not require that we understand them; nor does it require that we approve of their actions or their lifestyle or their decisions. And, it most certainly does not require that they love us, though it is always very nice when they do.

To love someone as Jesus loves us, to obey Christ's command and thereby discover that we are not alone, only requires that we submit the feelings of our hearts and the attitudes of our minds to the wisdom and the counsel of God.

Some things are best appreciated on our knees. Following and obeying Christ is the key to a life that is worth the living, the key to never being alone, the key to knowing the comfort of the Spirit's presence - the Spirit that communicates the presence of both the Father and The Son, as well as the Spirit that leads us to the truth, which sets us free.

All these things the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have told us, so that we might have the fullness of God's blessings - that we may know the true glory of love and the eternal joy and strength that life in Him brings.

Look and see - love and abide in him - be true and obey him as your Lord, and life will blossom all around us, like flowers in the spring; then, God will be revealed in his fullness to us and to the world around us.

We are called to walk through our human existence with our Creator, Jesus our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit of Truth, our Advocate; all are within us on the Way. As we love, we are loved, in each and every moment. As the saying goes, 'Love IS the answer,' especially in salvation.

Bless our God...who holds our souls in life...who has not rejected my prayer, nor withheld his love from me (Psalm 66:7a, 8b, 18b).

God is with us - Christ is in us - the Spirit is all around us.

Keeping faith in difficult times.

Amen.

Make melodies in your heart with these hymns:

- I Know That My Redeemer Lives # 619
- Be Not Afraid # 388
- On Our Way Rejoicing # 537