

HOM 4th Sunday Easter B 2021 April 25

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the statement St. Peter made in our first reading. In that reading, Pope Peter makes a declaration to the Jewish leaders that needs to be emphatically and repeatedly proclaimed in our day and until the end of time.

The setting is this: On their way to the Jerusalem Temple, Peter and John encounter a beggar at one of the gates who was from birth unable to walk. Peter told him, *“I have neither silver or gold, but what I do have I give you.”* He then took him by the hand and said, *“In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, ‘rise and walk!’”* The man got up and walked. In fact, he followed Peter and John into the Temple area, jumping and praising God.

A well-disposed crowd – quite familiar the beggar -- gathered to see this miracle, and Peter used the opportunity to tell them about Jesus who was crucified and then raised bodily on the third day, and in whose name this man was healed. He also invited them to repent and to be converted.

Well, when the Temple security guards saw and heard this, they arrested Peter and John, and the next day, took them before 70-member Jewish ruling body called the Sanhedrin, which happened to be in session. This is where today’s reading begins, with Peter addressing the members of the Sanhedrin about how the crippled man was healed.

Peter says to them: *“...it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead; in his name this man stands before you healed. He (Jesus) is the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.”* That in itself was a very courageous, politically incorrect thing to say. Peter was speaking truth to power by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, Peter then makes this supremely important declaration: **“THERE IS NO SALVATION THROUGH ANYONE ELSE, NOR IS THERE ANY OTHER NAME UNDER HEAVEN GIVEN TO THE HUMAN RACE BY WHICH WE ARE TO BE SAVED.”**

That is a blockbuster statement, even more so NOW than when Peter spoke it.

In our day, polite people would never say that in mixed company, that is, in a group of people with different religious faiths. In fact, although we can be sure absolutely certain that Pope Francis believes this, he chose not to say that Jesus is the world’s only savior in two very significant documents.

Indeed, in the Abu Dhabi *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, of February, 2019, which he co-signed with the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, it even states that: *“The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings.”*

Also, in his encyclical *On Fraternity and Social Friendship* of October, 2020, the most explicit reference to Jesus Christ by the Holy Father is this:

For us (Catholics) the wellspring of human dignity and fraternity is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. From it, there arises, “for Christian thought and for the action of the Church, the

primacy given to relationship, to the encounter with the sacred mystery of the other, to universal communion with the entire human family, as a vocation of all”

That’s good, but its not enough. If the apostle Peter, the first Pope, spoke the truth about Jesus Christ to non-Christian Jews who had the means to put him to death as they had already put Jesus to death, then the Successor of Peter in our day must do the same. And we must pray that he does.

But when Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the one and only Savior of Man, it must also be explained and properly understood. For example, it must explained that it does not mean that only Christians can be saved. The Church clearly teaches that all people of any religion, and even with no religion, can be saved, and that when other religions or even non-believers, embrace some elements of the Gospel, they are participating in some measure in the fullness of truth which subsists in the Catholic Church. Or, when they adhere even unknowingly to the Gospel commandments or to beliefs and practices related to the sacraments, they are participating in some measure in the full means of sanctification which reside with the Church.

Keep in mind, too, that while all must be baptized to be saved – Jesus said so -- the Church recognizes a *baptism of desire* by which persons, who through no fault of their own, do not know of Jesus or of the need for sacramental baptism, nevertheless acknowledge God and strive to do God’s will. Pope Peter inferred this where he said, as recounted in the Bible, in Chapter 10, verse 35, of the Acts of the Apostles: “*In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears Him and acts uprightly is acceptable to Him.*” To fear God is an acknowledgment of His existence and sovereignty and to act uprightly is to strive to do God’s will. That’s a baptism of desire.

But how do we connect that with what Peter said about Jesus being the only Savior and that there is no other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved? I dare say, brothers and sisters, the answer is both subtle and obvious, clear and yet difficult to accept. It is intrinsic to the Gospel and found in the most basic statement of Christian beliefs, namely the Apostles’ Creed.

The answer is something like this: Every person who enters heaven – be they Jew or Muslim, or Buddhist or Hindu, atheist or faithful Catholic, when they die – every person who enters heaven does so only in oneness with Jesus Christ who said “*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one come to the Father except through me.*” (John 14: 6) Furthermore, they enter heaven only in oneness with Jesus in His self-offering to the Father’s (will) unto the Cross and Resurrection.

But how is that possible unless Jesus Himself imparts to them a perfect understanding of the Gospel requirement for this and they agree to join Jesus in His oblation of praise, thanksgiving, and loving obedience unto crucifixion and Resurrection? It is not only possible, it is what the Church has been given to know and to believe and teach, and it is expressed in this short phrase in the Apostles’ Creed – HE DESCENDED INTO HELL –and the Catechism’s explanation of it. This explanation is found in paragraphs 631-637, particularly paragraphs 634 and 635 which state, in part:

‘The gospel was preached even to the dead.’ (That’s a quote from St. Peter in his first letter 4: 6.) The Catechism continues: *The descent into hell brings the Gospel message of*

salvation to complete fulfilment. This is the last phase of Jesus' messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ's redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption.

Christ went down into the depths of death so that 'the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.' Here again is a reference to the words of St. Peter.

The full meaning of this – and the only possible explanation – is that EVERY PERSON – even if only at the moment of death – is given an infused and perfect understanding of the Gospel message and of the necessity of being united to Jesus in Holy Communion in His eternal self-offering to the Father's will unto the Cross and Resurrection. If then, at the moment of death – standing before Jesus -- a person who has not known the Gospel or lived it fully by joining in Jesus' saving oblation -- consents to this, he will do so by way of Purgatory before entering with Jesus into the Father's House. And those who have fully shared in the Cross of obedience and love with Jesus unto death, will enter directly into heaven with Him.

In closing, in support of this, I also would point to today's Gospel reading where, in referring to Himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus says He lays down His life for the sheep. He adds that He lays it down freely, and takes it up again by His own power – a reference to His Crucifixion and Resurrection. And in the New Commandment of love that He gives us – LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU – He orders His Church to do the same – Bishops, priests and all the faithful. We must all do this to remain united to Him unto the Father's House.

And again, upon death, if we have not yet done this but are willing, we will do so by way of Purgatory. Today's second reading is an oblique reference to this. Where John writes: "*See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called children of God*", he is referring to our status as Baptized faithful, united to Jesus by water and the Holy Spirit. But then he goes on: "*Beloved, we are God's children NOW; what we SHALL be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*"

In other words, when we are ready to see God face to face, we will have become his "*grown up children*" so to speak. We will be fully conformed to Jesus crucified and Risen. We will, in this life or if necessary in Purgatory, have been freely united to Him in His oblation to the Father – in His suffering, Death, and Resurrection. We will, then, have come to full stature THROUGH, WITH, AND IN HIM, in whose image we were created.

And along with all the willing for whom we have offered ourselves, we will share fully in His divinity and divine glory.

INTERESTED?

If so, I invite you to join me in making or renewing your Eucharistic Self-Offering by praying these words silently and sincerely at Holy Communion: I AM ALL YOURS O MOST LOVING JESUS THROUGH MARY, YOUR MOTHER, WITH THE HELP OF ST. JOSEPH.