**Homily for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A**

**May 17, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 8:5-8, 14-17 (Philip evangelizes in Samaria.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 66 (Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Peter 3:15-18 (Be ready to give an explanation for your hope.)*

*Gospel: John 14:15-21 (I will not leave you orphans.)*

Today’s gospel, from Jesus’ Last Supper Discourse in the Gospel of John, is one of the few places in the New Testament where all three Persons of the Holy Trinity are mentioned in the same passage. However, Jesus is not offering his disciples a doctrinal lesson about the nature of God. His concern is *pastoral*, not catechetical. He realizes that his time on this earth is growing very short, and he wants to assure his disciples that *he will not leave them orphans*. Divine assistance will always be close at hand as they carry on with their Christian lives. So, he makes them a promise. If they observe his commandments, Jesus will interpret their obedience as *an act of love for him*. In response, the Father *and* the Son will love them and reveal themselves to them. In addition, the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth,” will abide with them and be an advocate on their behalf. So, the message of hope that Jesus wants to leave with his disciples, shortly before they experience the trauma of his passion and death, is that the Lord will always be with them, as long as they hold fast to what he taught them. They will be enveloped by God’s love, and God’s help will support them through any adversity.

That message, coming directly from Jesus, must have inspired great confidence in his disciples, especially after he rose from the dead and appeared to them. As he sent them forth to proclaim the Good News, he no doubt reminded them that the love of the Father and the Son and the companionship of the Holy Spirit would follow them everywhere they went. So, whenever they ventured into hostile territory in the course of their mission, they would not have felt alone or vulnerable. Rather, they would have remembered Jesus’ words: “I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.” What greater assurance could an Apostle want or need?

The *Acts of the Apostles* shows us how Philip demonstrated his confidence and courage, by heading straight into enemy territory. At the onset of the persecution in Jerusalem, he went right to the capital city of Samaria, where any Jew would be looked upon with suspicion and hatred, and he preached the Gospel to the Samaritans. According to *Acts*, “With one accord, the crowds paid attention to what was said by Philip when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing.” Just as Jesus promised, the Lord clearly was with Philip, working all sorts of miracles to grab the Samaritans’ attention and convince them that this foreigner from Jerusalem was speaking the truth. The city was filled with great joy, not just because many people had been cured of ailments and unclean spirits, but because all of them had heard the Good News of salvation and believed it.

In today’s second reading, Peter says, “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence…” If he had said that to his fellow Apostles as they prepared to go out from Jerusalem to spread the Gospel, then the hope to which he referred might have been Jesus’ promise that the love of God and the protection of the Holy Spirit would accompany them everywhere. However, this advice was given much later, as part of a pastoral letter from Peter, the Bishop of Rome and leader of the universal Church, to all the Christian communities in existence at that time. So, it’s pretty clear that the hope to which he refers is our *hope for salvation*, based on our belief that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised up to save us and set us free. As Christians, we need to be ready at a moment’s notice to explain why we hold fast to that hope.

If asked to defend his own *personal* hope for salvation in Christ, Peter would have had ample reasons. He knew Jesus intimately. Jesus told him and his fellow Apostles that he would prepare a place for them in his Father’s house. Later, Peter saw Jesus after he rose from the dead and witnessed him ascend into heaven. There could be no doubt in Peter’s mind that his hope of salvation was firmly grounded in the Lord’s personal promise to him and his friends.

We are not in the same position as Peter, though. We have not seen the Risen Christ. He has not sat across the table from us and personally assured us that his death and resurrection have saved us. Rather, we have to rely on the eyewitness testimony found in the Scriptures and the tradition handed down to us by the Church. Still, if someone were to question us about our hope for eternal life, especially someone who did not believe, we would need a reason based on something more immediate than what we have read in the Scriptures or learned in our catechism. Like Peter, we would need to turn to *our own personal experience of God*. Our Christian faith may have begun with the testimony of others, but it has been strengthened and confirmed over time, as our personal relationship with God has continued to deepen. We feel Jesus’ love, the Father’s love, and the Holy Spirit’s support, just as Jesus promised to his Apostles. If the Lord has so clearly made good on his promise not to leave us orphans as we go out into the world and live the Gospel, then we have every reason to hope that he will make good on his promise of salvation, too.

This is why we can speak with such gentleness and reverence when we discuss our faith and our hope for salvation with those who question us. It is because the core of our testimony is not a doctrine taught by the Church or a citation from Scripture, but a personal relationship with the Lord who loves us, reveals himself to us, and walks with us on every step of our journey. Our testimony is that God has been gentle and merciful with us. God has given *everything* to save us from our sins and bring us to everlasting life. And now, we continue to feel God’s Holy Spirit with us, every day, just as Jesus promised. If that is not sufficient reason to hope, then I don’t know what is.