

Second Sunday of Easter

First Lesson: Acts 4: 32-35

The times since the Day of Pentecost have been **tumultuous** for the disciples. Peter and John have **healed** a lame man in the temple, as a consequence of which they were put on **trial** before the Jewish Council. Although the Jewish Council decided to let Peter and John go, it was with the **warning** that they were **never** to speak or teach in the name of Jesus again. To which Peter and John replied that it was better to obey **God** rather than man. This episode had the effect of closely **uniting** the Christians, to such an extent that they all bonded **together** as one family, sharing **freely** with those in **need** among **them**, even selling property and giving the money to the apostles in order that it could be distributed to those in the **Christian family** who needed it.

Epistle Lesson: 1 John 1: 1 - 2: 2

St. John is writing a letter to the early Christians, dealing with some **basics** of the Christian life. First of all, he describes the **person** about whom the apostles preach: someone who existed from the very **beginning**, who **walked** among them, who explained God's **words** to them, the person who represents **life eternal**, the person because of whom Christians can have fellowship with God the Father: that person is **Jesus Christ**.

But then St. John addresses the **responsibilities** of a Christian: if we say that we are in **fellowship** with God the Father and with His Son, Jesus, in whom we have light and life, we can no longer walk in the darkness of **sin** but must walk in the light of **righteousness**. In such a fellowship with God we receive the **forgiveness** of our sins. But if we **refuse** to acknowledge our sins, or **deny** that we have done **anything** wrong, we make God a **liar**, and His truth is not in us.

Finally, St. John reassures Christians who **do** sin and acknowledge their sin that Jesus Christ is the advocate (or attorney) for them to the Father, since He is the **propitiation** (*i.e.*, the One who **enables** conciliation with God the Father) for their sins as well as the sins of the whole world (including **ours!**).

Gospel Lesson: John 20: 19-31

It is now the evening of that first Easter Day, and we find all of the disciples gathered together in one place, behind **locked doors**. Why locked **doors**? They **feared** that they were going to suffer the **same** fate as Jesus. But suddenly Jesus is standing in the midst of them and bids them **peace**. After showing them His pierced hands and feet, the disciples are **finally** convinced, and are delighted to see their Lord again. Then Jesus tells them that since He has now **completed** the mission that His Father had given Him, He now is sending all of his **disciples** out on the **same** mission, with **authority to forgive sins**.

Then St. John notes that Thomas was not **there** when this all happened. So when he finally appears, apparently long after Jesus had left, they tell him that they have seen Jesus. Perhaps there was a history of the disciples kidding one another. Whatever the case was, Thomas declares that he is **not** going to believe them until he has the hard **evidence** in front of him. Thus, when Jesus appears to them a week later, when Thomas is present, Jesus instructs Thomas **not** to doubt but to **believe**. Jesus then pronounces a blessing on all Christians since: **Blessed are those who believe in Him without the need for evidence or understanding**.

Interestingly, St. John concludes today's reading with the observation that Jesus did **many** other signs and miracles in the presence of witnesses, but St. John has included just a **few** of those in this gospel in order that **we** may believe that Jesus really **is** the Promised Messiah, the Son of God; and that by **believing** we will have **eternal life** with Him.

Third Sunday of Easter

First Lesson: Acts 3: 11-21

As our reading begins, we learn that Peter and John, while going into the temple to **pray**, see a man who has been a congenital **cripple** begging for money. Instead of money, they give the man a **restored** body in the name of Jesus. The man first of all **rejoices** by walking and **leaping** and **praising** God, then clinging onto Peter and John in **gratitude**. Since the lame man had been well known to **all** temple visitors, the event draws a **crowd**. Peter seized this opportunity to explain to them that this man was healed in the name of **Jesus**, the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob, the author of **life**, whom **they** killed by asking the Roman authorities to release the murderer **Barabbas** but instead to crucify Jesus in his place.

Peter then says that their behavior might be **excused** because they didn't **really** know what they were doing. But now that they **know** what they have done, they need to **repent** so that God can **forgive** their sins. And they need to **believe** in the crucified Jesus, about whom the prophets had spoken long ago.

Epistle Lesson: 1 John 3: 1-7

As St. John continues his **first** letter, he expresses amazement at the **love** which God the Father has given to those who **believe**, making them His **Children** right **now!** And as God's Children, we will be **like** Jesus in Heaven, although we do not yet appreciate what that will **be**. But since Jesus is sinless, we should no longer **practice sinning**, which is **lawlessness**. After all, someone who keeps on sinning has neither **seen** nor **known** God. Instead, we should practice **righteousness**.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 24: 36-49

St. Luke records for us the event that took place behind locked doors on the evening of that **first** Easter. You will recall that last Sunday we read this same story from **St. John's** perspective. Again we find Jesus suddenly standing in their **midst**, bidding them peace, and showing them the marks in His hands and feet in order to convince them that it is **really** He, not a spirit. Then He asks for **food**, and **eats** it in their presence, as additional evidence that He really is the risen Messiah, not some spirit.

Next He gives them a lecture on how He has fulfilled **all** of the prophecies about Him that were recorded in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. He notes in particular that the Messiah would have to **suffer, die, and rise** again on the **third** day. Under these circumstances, then, He notes that **repentance** and **forgiveness of sins** needs to be proclaimed in His name to **all** nations, beginning in Jerusalem, because they, the disciples, were **witnesses** of all of this. But then Jesus says something unexpected: **don't** be a witness of these things **yet**. Instead, **wait** until you have been endowed with the **power** of the **Holy Spirit, the promise of the Father** (which occurred for these disciples on the day of **Pentecost**).

Fourth Sunday of Easter

First Lesson: Acts 4: 1-12

As we have heard during the last two Sunday's readings, Peter and John—while going into the temple courtyard to pray, healed a lame man **in the name of Jesus**. This allowed Peter to preach a **sermon** to the gathering crowd. In the middle of his sermon, Peter is confronted by the **priests**, the captain of the temple (*i.e.*, the **Levite** in charge of the temple guards), and the **Sadducees**. What is important about the **Sadducees** is that they do **not** believe in a resurrection of the dead. Now, about **what** do you suppose Peter is preaching? Yep, you guessed it. Jesus, who was crucified, who died, and **who is now resurrected from the dead**. So the Jewish officials put a stop to this by arresting Peter and John, and keeping them in prison overnight. But the hearts of Peter's hearers had **already** been spoken to by the Holy Spirit, to the extent that another **2,000 men** were added to the 3,000 men who believed on the Day of Pentecost.

The next day, Peter and John are hauled before the rulers, elders and scribes, along with the high-priestly line, who are **demanding** to know by what **power** and by whose **name** Peter and John had healed the lame man. Peter, of course, **jumped** at this lead in, pointing out that the man was healed **by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth**, the same fellow that **they** were responsible for crucifying just a few months earlier. Then he declares that God had made **them** builders for His Church, but they instead **rejected** the very stone that God had intended, which now is the **chief cornerstone** of this building. Finally, Peter lays it on the line: there is **no other name** given on earth whereby people may be **saved** from their sins and thereby be able to enjoy eternal life with God Himself, except **Jesus the Christ!**

Epistle Lesson: 1 John 3: 16-24

During the last two Sunday's epistle readings, we heard parts of St. John's treatise on **Godly love**. Today's reading continues that thought, starting out with the observation that if **Jesus was willing to lay down His life for us**, we should at least be willing **to share** some of the wealth that God has entrusted to us with

those of our **brothers** who are in need. And if we **have** such a willing and generous heart, then we have the confidence that **God will hear our prayers**. That is to say, what **pleases** God about us is that we please Him by **keeping** His commandments. Furthermore, whoever keeps God's commandments **abides in Him**. And what are those crucial commandments? That we **believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ**, and that we **love each other**.

Gospel Lesson: John 10: 11-18

Jesus has just healed a man who had been **born** blind. In today's reading, St. John records an episode in which Jesus is describing to the Jewish crowd who He **really** is. In contrast to a person hired to tend the sheep, who flees to let the sheep fend for themselves when there is danger, Jesus is the **Good Shepherd** who lays down His **life** so that the sheep may be saved. Not only that, but Jesus **knows each of His sheep by name** and **they know Him**, just as the Father knows Jesus and Jesus knows the Father.

But then Jesus comments that He has **other sheep** that are not **currently** of this fold, but He is seeking them out to **add** to His flock so that there will be **one** flock led by **one** Shepherd, Jesus. Obviously, Jesus is referring to the **Gentiles**, who in the years to come will constitute the **bulk** of His flock.

Finally, Jesus observes that God the Father **loves** Him because He is laying down His life for **all** of the sheep, and that He is doing it **willingly** and of His own accord, because Jesus had been given the **authority**, or option, by the Father to lay His life down and to take it up again. Jesus demonstrated His love for **us** by **laying down His life for us**.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

First Lesson: Acts 8: 26-40

Chapter 7 of the book of **Acts** is devoted to the circumstances surrounding the **martyrdom** of Stephen, one of the **deacons** of the early church. Chapter 8 then begins the **consequences** of that death: the **persecution** of the church, led by Saul. The persecution was so **intense** that many of the believers had to **flee** Jerusalem in order to escape certain death. Philip, **another** of the early deacons, was one of these. He fled to the city of **Samaria**, where he shared the Gospel, accompanied by great **signs and wonders**, to the extent that **many** men and women believed.

With his mission accomplished in Samaria, God now tells Philip to turn around and head south toward Jerusalem and then southwest toward **Gaza**, which lies along the southeastern Mediterranean Sea. Understand that this would have to be a several-day journey on **foot**. But as Philip is on that road to Gaza, he encounters the **treasurer** of Ethiopia who apparently had been in Jerusalem to **worship** but now was on his way home. (It is believed that Ethiopia turned to Judaism after the visit of the Queen of **Sheba** to King Solomon; **Sheba** is believed to have constituted the present-day countries of Ethiopia and Yemen.) The Treasurer is reading—apparently out **loud**—that section of **Isaiah chapter 53** that prophesies the sacrifice of the **Messiah**, and when Philip appears and asks him whether he **understands** what he is reading, the Treasurer opens **wide** a door for Philip to share the story of **Jesus**, which he does. The Treasurer receives the message of the gospel with **joy** and asks to be **baptized**. And when they suddenly happen to come upon some fresh water, Philip **baptizes** the Treasurer, who happily goes on his way to Egypt and then to Ethiopia, while Philip is **transported** by the Spirit to Azotus (also known as **Ashdod**, one of the cities of the Philistines), where he continues to share the **gospel** as he proceeds north to the port of Caesarea.

Epistle Lesson: 1 John 4: 1-11 (12-21)

Continuing to read from **St. John's** treatise on Godly love, his **first letter**, we learn today some extremely useful information as to **how** to live our Christian lives. First of all, he addresses the question of how to **evaluate** people who **claim** to be prophets of God with a **new message** for present-day Christians. The question we are to pose is whether that so-called prophet confesses that Jesus Christ is **God** who has come in **human flesh**. If he does, that is a **good sign** (but we still need to apply what Jesus said in **Matthew chapter 7**—does he or she lead a **godly** life?). If that so-called prophet does **not** confess that Jesus is God incarnate, then that person represents the **anti-Christ**, which St. John points out **is already in the world**. So by this **test** we can determine which is the Spirit of truth and which is the spirit of **error**, because He (the **Holy Spirit**) who is **in us** is **greater/more powerful** than the spirit who is in the world. We **can** overcome that earthly spirit!

Then St. John returns to his discourse on **Godly** love, noting that we are to **love one another**, as that is the **defining** behavior of those who are born of God. That is to say, if we do **not** exhibit Godly love (sacrificial love for someone **else's** benefit), then we really do **not** know God, because God loved us so **much** that He was willing to sacrifice His own **Son**, who is the **propitiation** for our sins (that is to say, the one who **reconciles** us to God by dying in our place). St. Paul then observes that **if** we love each **other**, then God lives in us. But if we **don't** love other believers, that is **clear** evidence that we do **not** love God.

Gospel Lesson: John 15: 1-8

As we have seen previously in the **Gospel** according to **St. John**, today's readings feature **more** of Jesus' claims of "**I am**," the name by which God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush at Mt. Sinai (**Exodus 3: 14**). In this case, Jesus states that he is the **vine** upon which every branch (*i.e.*, **every Christian**) must stay **attached** if that branch is to be **fruitful**. A branch that is **detached** from the vine is a **dead** branch in real life, and a dead branch **spiritually** as well. And, as everyone knows, a dead branch does **not** produce **fruit**. Instead, it is picked up and either thrown into a fire or fed into a chipper. Similarly, if a **Christian** is going to be **fruitful** in God's Kingdom, he/she must stay **attached** to Jesus. In other words, one needs to receive sustenance **everyday** in order to stay alive and be fruitful.

Jesus concludes this discussion by noting that **if** one stays attached to Him (*i.e.*, abides in Him), and His words **abide** in that person, **then** that person can ask Jesus for **whatever** one wishes, and it will be granted. Upon first glance, this would appear to be a **blank check**. Upon **closer** scrutiny, however, one sees that this promise of Jesus is followed by another comment, that the **purpose** of whatever you wish should **glorify the Father**, not yourself.