

April 11, 2021

Easter II

Year B

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was revealed, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was revealed to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you.*

1 John 1:1-3a

The passage you have just heard, part of today's second reading, was written around the end of the 1st century C.E. by a student or disciple of Saint John the Evangelist. The writer is un-named but we can infer from his use of the first person plural, "we," that he is an elder or teacher of the community from which he writes, and is writing on behalf of other teachers. We also know from the document itself that he writes to counter erroneous claims of a group that "went out from us," as he puts it—separatists who left the community (1 John 2:19) believing that Jesus was indeed a spiritual being, but one who only took on the appearance of being human. Earlier evidence of disbelief and seeds of disagreement can be found in John's gospel itself from the words of doubt put into the mouth of Thomas and the words of Jesus in the gospel passage you just heard: "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*" (John 20:29b).

But what does all this have to do with us living today? Don't we share the same doubts from time to time? Mother Jan spoke of them in her sermon at the beginning of Lent. Who is Jesus for us? What do we mean when we call Jesus "Lord"? These are not just the questions of a bygone past; they are ours today as well.

Now if you pay careful attention to its dating, this letter leads us to believe that it speaks not only of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God experienced and proclaimed in the days immediately after that first Easter, but also of the ongoing presence of the living Lord in the day to day experiences of the community of believers some 60 to 70 years later. As the writer puts it: "*we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was revealed to us—that which we have seen and heard.*" To be clear, this testimony refers to ongoing and constant experiences over those 60 to 70 years. God's grace is incarnate in real people. Where can we see this grace-filled life lived out today?

Real and significant change is underway in the U.S. religious landscape. Recent polling from the Pew Research Center indicates that church attendance is declining and data suggests that Christians are declining not just as a share of the U.S. adult population, but also in absolute numbers. Maybe there is a lesson to be learned here in the sphere of faith and spirituality. Maybe the questions that we have been so preoccupied with,

questions like “What do you believe?” and “How do our respective beliefs differ?”—maybe these questions should be reframed to “How do you go about living your faith?” This is not a new question, but one posed over and over again by Jesus himself.

One of Cindy’s favorite YouTube videos is titled “Male Pattern Blindness.” It’s less than a minute long and I think she must see something of me in it. The video features a husband looking through the kitchen pantry and asking his wife, who is in the other room, “Honey, where are the raisins?” She responds, “There in the cabinet to the left of the stove.” There follows this exchange: Husband—“They’re not here.” Wife—“Yes, they are.” Husband—“No, they’re not.” Wife—“They’re on the second shelf.” Husband—“They’re not here.” Wife—“Yes, they are.” Husband—“No, they’re not.” Wife—getting upset—“Yes, they are. I put them there myself. Don’t make me come in there.” Husband—“They’re not here.” Wife—completely frustrated and angry, marches into the kitchen and places the raisins forcefully in his hand. You’ll have to watch the video to hear his response.

Have we been suffering from a kind of blindness that others are seeing? Have we settled for talk about the gospel rather than really living it? God in God’s self is ineffable, but God among us as Jesus was love, compassion, and mercy personified. In him the way of love and its way of life were one and the same.

Here we come face to face with paradox. Simply going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car. This is not to devalue worship, but worship has meaning only when you realize how greatly you have been blessed and you know the tremendous need you have to offer thanks—thanks which can take many forms—the most Christ-like of which is compassionate care for others.

I don’t much care for the term “anonymous Christian”, but we must admit that there are those who don’t bear the name “Christian” who are living intuitively the way of love that Jesus taught. “Hidden” in plain sight, the good news is being manifested today right in front of us; we have only to recognize it and be thankful. What I am saying may seem scandalous to some because it isn’t identified as overtly Christian. But love in all its forms, if it is genuine and heartfelt, is of God; for elsewhere in this same letter appear the words, “*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them*” (1 John 4:16b).