

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 14:21-27

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

After Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed the good news to that city and made a considerable number of disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch. They strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith, saying, "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." They appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, commended them to the Lord in whom they had put their faith. Then they traveled through Pisidia and reached Pamphylia. After proclaiming the word at Perga they went down to Attalia. From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now accomplished. And when they arrived, they called the church together and reported what God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 145:8-9, 10-11, 12-13

I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works.

I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

Let all your works give you thanks, O LORD, and let your faithful ones bless you. Let them discourse of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might.

I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

Let them make known your might to the children of Adam, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is a kingdom for all ages, and your dominion endures through all generations.

I will praise your name for ever, my king and my God.

SECOND READING: Revelation 21:1-5a

A reading from the Book of Revelation:

Then I, John, saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold,

God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away." The One who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 13:31-33a, 34-35

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

When Judas had left them, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and God will glorify him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little while longer. I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 5th Sunday of Easter

Why do we have to go through many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God? How are hardships good news? Can this be a religious no pain, no gain? We can have a mistaken notion that having faith and living a good, moral life can prevent us from any trouble and pain. Faith and religion can never do that. We, as people of faith, do not believe in magic for we believe in God and in his son, Jesus. Through our faith we can find meaning in hardship, significance in suffering and the presence of God at any time. Jesus, himself, had a rough time. The cross and his messy death was no picnic. We all have tough times as we live life anyway. We live life in the presence of God. Our goal is eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Our prayers, good works, witness and liturgy serve to deepen our sense of community in Christ, which helps us to glimpse what the Kingdom will be. They are God's gifts to us as God's beloved children.

We take travel for granted. We take vacation trips, errands to the store and to visit family with ease, more or less. All the travel that these early missionaries experienced was never like ours. We have planes, trains, cruise ships and automobiles to convey us in relative comfort. The apostles traveled by foot, either theirs or an animal's. Their only rapid transit was by ship. The distance between Chicago and Milwaukee could take several days by foot or at least a day by sailboat depending on the winds. What's more, there were no fast food stops

along the way. They had to travel with food, water and survival gear too. They moved from town to town in an entourage for safety. By car, it's just over an hour away. Hardships are part of life. God went with them as God goes with us.

Their notion of traveling in God's presence also led them to the realization that their work and their success was really God working and succeeding through them. God saw them safely home. God led them to success. God opened the door to the Gentiles and us. I once spoke to an esteemed heart surgeon many years ago who had this same sentiment. He may have performed successful surgeries but it was God who healed his patients. If any homily, teaching or reflection I give makes any sense and has any depth, it is solely through the grace of God who gave me the ability to string the words together. Even the desire to thank and praise God is God's gift of grace. Can we actively seek this sense as we live today? We can, in God's amazing and saving grace. Our experiences are much the same as the apostles. Their faith lives in us.

John described the indescribable. Revelation was written after the year seventy, of the Common Era. The Roman Legions destroyed the city of Jerusalem in that year; razing it to the ground. In its place they built the pagan, secular city of Aelia Capitolina five or six decades later. In any event, the Holy City of David, Jerusalem, was no more. This is no urban renewal that John described. It is the Kingdom of God that will be established forever upon Jesus' expected return. John chose to describe it as a "heavenly city" in a symbolic reference. He stated that God dwells with the human race. He restated the ancient covenant God made with Abraham, Moses and the entire Hebrew people. Except, God makes this new covenant with the entire human race. This is what is entirely new; not the few or the many but humanity in its entirety. All people are created in the image and likeness of God. There is only one human race.

Since COVID still rages among us, people still war with their neighbors and we face our parish's immanent closure, are these our hardships? Is this our path to the Kingdom of God? Can we find this "Holy City" of God as we face them and in a new parish with new people? If we live by faith, we can for we know God's abiding presence as we experience life. Here, our movement toward God is our movement to one another. We can find meaning in what we face for God remains with us, true to God's covenant with us. God is our God and we are God's own people.

Sometimes the gospel of John can sound like gobbledygook. Today's gospel is one that does. John has written with symbols on many levels. Judas had left; it was night. What makes this passage confusing is the change of tenses; from present to past to future. The Son of Man is, was and will be glorified. When put this way, the meaning is clearer and more familiar. God is eternal. God's name is I AM, the

eternal now spanning all time, place and space. What, though, is glory? It is more than we think.

Glory, in human experience, can mean fame and renown. This describes the notion of celebrity. There is also a religious component. When people experience God's presence either in a community or personally, they glimpse God's glory. It is the sense of holiness, fleeting though it may be. Glory can also have an element of sacrifice or death. Soldiers experience their glory in death. They have sacrificed their lives for a greater good than their own life. Jesus did that upon the cross. Through our fasting during Lent, we can know the presence of God, both giving and glimpsing God's glory. We lift people up on our shoulders as an expression of their success or glory. Jesus was lifted upon the cross to die. Glory, like God is just a thought away. Glory at once can be now for us.

This passage has a context. It is part of Jesus' farewell message to the disciples, which also includes us as we read these words. The message, "Love one another," is not new. But its context is, for Jesus added the phrase, "As I have loved you!" How has Jesus loved? To the death; Jesus died to save you and me through the forgiveness of our sins. No one deserves this kind of love. Yet the Son of God chose to do so in his death. What does this imply for us? This is the love that marks Jesus disciples as his. What kind of love is this? There's a better question to ask. Who is love? God. As difficult as this command can sit with us, it is even more difficult to live and bear witness. We do so by the grace of God.

Only God is perfect. We will fail. We have the gift of new life because God has gifted us with faith. We believe in God and in Jesus. That's all we need. For when we fail, God's love will forgive us to try again. Jesus has loved us to his death. Since none of us gets out of this life alive, we can love others to our death, imperfectly none the less. Parents give the best of their lives to their kids. Any time we give our best for the common good, we live this one commandment of Jesus. What is the difference between a good deed and a witness to Christ? Perhaps it's no more than our intention. It's just, like God, a mere thought away. Would Jesus command us to do the impossible? We live in faith and by God's grace, God will establish the Kingdom.

The hallmark of God's love is forgiveness. As God has forgiven us first, we can share the gift with others. This may be the true challenge of Jesus command. It's easier to forgive those we love and others we like than it is to forgive those we don't. We may view our worst enemy as an enemy of God too. That's a delusion. Just as each of us is God's beloved son or daughter, the same is true for those we dislike or, worse, hate. God loves them too with a love that is infinite, eternal and unconditional. God loves and saves sinners, of whom I am foremost. Forgiveness does not excuse us of our sins. God lets our sins go, in God's mercy. For us to

forgive another, we let go of the judgment, anger and pain that we can hold in a death grip. Our forgiveness of another may do nothing for them. It frees us from our internal burden. God heals us as we forgive. Let go and let God. God can stand between us and our enemies as a buffer and bond. Forgiving is not forgetting. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. God doesn't want us to be bound to abuse. Forgiveness is a process and not a single event. We love our enemies when we forgive them. Sometimes avoiding them is by God's grace too. Only God remembers our sins no more; only God is perfect. In our human nature, we can only reflect God in glimpses.

Living life is rarely easy. We face troubles and trial all the time as we live. We live by faith and by God's grace. God never leaves us as we do so. Our path leads us through our lives and to God's eternal life in the Kingdom. In the meantime, we await it as we live and remember God's great gifts.

May we dwell in God's presence; who lives in each of us.

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