

Easter III April 23, 2023 Year B

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter is speaking to the people who have come to Jerusalem for the Passover. To the assembled crowd it would have been inconceivable that the Messiah could suffer and die. The Messiah they expected was a military hero from the lineage of the House of David. He would defeat the Romans and restore Israel's independence. He would usher in the Kingdom of God and rule as King.

Acts is out to prove that the cross was no accident. It was God in his compassion, who sent Jesus to us to save us from our enslavement to sin.

Jesus saves us from a different kind of enemy – ourselves. Peter insists that Jesus was delivered up to the cross by the foreordained knowledge and counsel of God. He uses quotes from the Psalms as proof that it was the fulfillment of prophecy. The crowd, in delivering Jesus to Pilate to be crucified, acted in ignorance.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead changed everything. Before the resurrection appearances the Apostles were hiding from the authorities in fear of their lives. After they experienced the risen Jesus they began to preach his resurrection with boldness.

The people now realize that they have contributed to a crime. They ask what they should do. Peter tells them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. They will receive the Holy Spirit which has been promised to all those the Lord calls to him. Three thousand people were baptized that day.

Are you sure that you know what God's will is? Will you allow God to change your mind?

The First Letter of Peter was written to those in Asia Minor who were suffering persecution. In order to remove suspicion for starting the catastrophic fire in Rome, Nero blamed the Christians. They were put to death in horrible ways. This letter is that of a pastor. The author reminds his fellow Christians that they are called to lead holy lives because God is holy. [The New Interpreter's Bible puts it this way: "Their story was destined by God from the beginning and moves toward God at the end."] They have been called; they will be judged. The times in between these times looks back to that foundation and ahead to its consummation."

The holiness of God's new people is not centered in God alone or in individual spiritual practices. The holiness code in First Peter seeks to build a community of living hope. It consists of love for God, purity of self and love for brothers and sisters.

Peter reminds his readers that God has called them away from their pagan lives. He has redeemed them by the sacrifice of his own son: by the blood of Jesus shed on the cross: more precious than gold. So they are to live their present lives in holiness to God and to each other.

Our Gospel today is one of my favorite post-resurrection stories. It is strangely ironic. Here are the two disciples leaving Jerusalem away from the awful events that have taken place there. They are discussing these things when a stranger, whom they do not recognize as Jesus, joins their conversation. Here they are telling Jesus all about his suffering on the cross. How strange is that? In addition they tell him about

the women's witness of the empty tomb and a vision of angels saying Jesus was alive. More strange and puzzling stories.

The stranger then rebukes them and tells them that prophets said it was necessary that the Messiah must suffer before he comes into his glory. He interprets Moses and the prophets to them, proving he is right. They still don't recognize him.

It all comes to a head when they stop at an inn for the night and invite the stranger to join them. At supper with them he breaks the bread and gives it to them. Shades of the last supper. It is then that they realize who he is. And then he vanishes from their sight.

In hindsight the disciples recall how when he opened the scriptures to them, their hearts "burned within them". I don't know about you, but I have often recognized Jesus' presence in my life in hindsight. I am often too caught in daily life to pay attention.

Why did it take the disciples so long to recognize Jesus? I think it was because they didn't expect to see him. They knew Jesus was dead and put in a tomb. It wasn't in their experience to have someone rise from the dead. As for the women's testimony about the empty tomb and the angels – everyone knew how unreliable women's testimony was; it wasn't even admissible in court.

I think that when we are caught up in our own thoughts and certainties, we miss what God is doing right now. Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth.