

HOMILETICS

D. Tither, C.S.S.R

2nd Sunday of Easter-tide (April 5)

PEACE THROUGH ANGUISH

The fifty days after Easter are considered as one big Feast-day of joy and praise. What Sunday is to the week, Easter-tide is to the year. During this time, the first reading at Mass is taken from the Acts of the Apostles, the inspired and inspiring account of the earliest days of Christianity. Today (Acts 4.32-34) we remember the joyful union and charity that reigned among the first Christians. We recall that this charity, today as then, is produced by the Holy Spirit, and that He is sent to us by the Risen Savior. And in the Gospel (Jo. 20.19-31) we relive two quite dramatic appearances of the Risen Lord and His first recorded imparting of the Holy Spirit.

Imagine we're witnessing this scene on the first Easter night. Earlier in the day the Lord has appeared to Magdalena, to Peter and to the disciples at Emmaus. But the reports are not fully believed, they are literally "too good to be true." The time is night, the place quite likely the Cenaculo. The city is buzzing with the news of the empty tomb, but circulating too is the bogus fabrication that the body has been stolen (Mt. 28.13). In terror the Apostles have locked themselves in. Only Thomas is absent, maybe he is pessimistic, even skeptical after Good Friday's events.

Suddenly, the Risen Lord is among them! But the doors are still locked! He has new and amazing qualities, He is independent of time and space. He can still be touched (v. 20); St. Luke adds the detail that He looked for something to eat. He commissions them, exactly

as He has been sent by the Father. They and their successors are to continue His work, be His other selves (v. 21). Then He breathes on them (a symbolic gesture of handing over power): "Receive the Holy Spirit," He says (v. 22).

This fulness of power from the Holy Spirit is to be over *sin*. Each Sacrament derives its power from the Holy Spirit, and that goes for Confession too. Since His Ascension, we can't ask Our Lord directly for pardon. His forgiveness is still available, from the Apostles and their successor. The Holy Spirit works through Christ's priests, His other selves. Confession was instituted on the most joyful day of the world's history, and it was given to us precisely to bring us peace—never look on it in any other light.

When Thomas joined the other Apostles, he met their joyful announcement: "We have seen the Lord" with a most exacting demand for proof (v. 25). And he remained stubborn and obstinate for a full week till Jesus again appears and asks Thomas to apply his tests. No need, absolutely none. Thomas cry of faith: "My Lord and my God" is as explicit as any in the N.T. And Jesus tells him and us that the more our faith is independent of natural arguments, the better it is (v. 29).

What have these two apparitions in common? The lesson about how to achieve peace (vv. 19,21,26). The precious gift of peace is acquired, not by retreating from the world's turmoil, but by getting right into it, and striving to the point of anguish, to straighten it out. To stand by or hide away during injustice is to make ourselves "consentidores".

Jesus came into the Cenaculo that first Easter night as a Victor. He had triumphed over death, over selfish sin and cruel brutality on a far higher plane than war or bitter hatred.

His Apostles had still to learn about this. They were looking for peace in safe isolation. They cowered behind locked doors, hoping to be free from trouble and disturbance. "Peace at all costs"—that would be legitimate. But they wanted peace at *any* cost, even that of avoiding all human involvement.

Their doors, their locks are useless. With splendid freedom, the Lord is there, showing what peace should mean. As a true Hero who has overcome evil, He announces the first fruits of His victory: "Peace be to you." Perhaps there is no more reassuring word in any language than the very word He kept repeating: "Shalom"

It must have sounded like a general pardon, and it was that. Their cowardice, their refusal to believe those who had seen Him risen, all was forgiven and forgotten as if it had never happened. But it was much more than an absolution, it was a profound expression of all He had endured, and what He had achieved.

The Psalms tell us: "Seek after peace and pursue it." You won't find it if you remain huddled behind locked doors, you'll only get it by straining every nerve to get rid of injustice and misery. Go out like the dove from Noe's ark — out from protective shelter into the chaos of the deluge.

Open the doors! Out into the thick of it! Then, like the Risen Savior, we'll bring a message of peace to an insecure world, we'll stir the disheartened with the vision that peace is truly possible, that the Resurrection has happened!

The Risen Lord told Magdalene not to hold Him back. He tells us the same. If we refuse to be involved, if we refuse to do His work, we are indeed restraining Him. "As often as you refused it to one of these My little ones, it was to Me that you refuse it." Peace be with you my brethren.

3rd Sunday of Easter-tide (April 12)

RISEN AND PREACHED

On the afternoon of the first Easter Sunday, two of Christ's disciples left Jerusalem to go to Emmaus. Naturally they were discussing the tragic events of the last few days. They had such high hopes of Jesus. And now He had been killed, and to add to their sorrow, it was rumoured that His body had been stolen — at least His tomb was

empty. A Stranger joins them, asks them why they are so sad, and they tell Him all. So deep is their grief and disappointment that they do not recognize this Stranger. He hears them out and then proceeds to recall all the O.T. prophecies about Himself, that it was necessary that He suffer these things and so enter into His glory.

When they reach Emmaus, the two disciples urge the kind Stranger to be their guest. During supper He takes bread, blesses and breaks it and they suddenly recognize a familiar gesture (or maybe they notice the marks of the nails) and at that He disappears. Leaving the meal, they hurry back to Jerusalem. As they go, they relive the moments when their hearts had almost burst as He recounted God's plan for Himself. Arrived at the Cenaculo they find the Apostles exclaiming that the Lord had indeed risen and appeared to Peter!

It is at this point that today's Gospel extract takes over. (Lk. 26. 31-68). The two disciples are relating their experience at Emmaus when Jesus appears to all of them. "Peace be to you" He says, "it is I, fear not." How often He had spoken of peace, the keynote of His preaching: "These things I have spoken to you, that you may have peace (Jo. 16.33). How He praised the peacemakers, those who struggle and strive to make the world peaceful (Mt. 5.9). For all of us to be of one mind, to have peace, as far as possible, with all men (Rom. 12.18), to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4.3), this is Christian living.

At His request, the disciples examine and even touch His wounded hands and feet. He eats with them. Again, as He had earlier done on the way to Emmaus, He recalls from the O.T. how the Divine Plan has been fulfilled in His life and now especially in His death and resurrection. "Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His Name to all nations" (vv. 46-47).

Notice that the Risen Lord stresses *three* things—the necessity of His death, then His resurrection, and lastly, but equally stressed, the necessity of *preaching* this. Yes, Christ crucified, risen and *preached*—this is the theme of the last words of Jesus recorded in St. Luke's Gospel.

What is this preaching to be? It is the proclaiming, with solemnity and authority, of the good news that God our Father loves us in Christ, and has raised us to life, a new and everlasting life, in His Son. It is not a history of past events that is proclaimed, but a living message, having an impact on our lives *now*.

We see a sample of Apostolic preaching in the first reading (Acts 3. 13-18). It was occasioned by a miracle, the instantaneous cure of a well-known cripple in the name of the Risen Jesus. A crowd gathers, amazed and astonished. While the cured man clings to Peter, he directs their attention to the true source of the spectacular cure — the Risen Lord working through His Church.

Remember Peter is speaking to Jews, who know well the O.T. prophecies about the Redeemer. Reminding them of God's interventions in their history, beginning with Abraham, he proclaims the latest and greatest of all God's wonderful works — the Resurrection. The Apostles are the official witnesses of this stupendous fact (v. 15). He calls Jesus the Author of life — both because, glorified and empowered to send the Holy Spirit, He is the source of our sharing in the divine life.

The crucifixion ought not have been a scandal to the Jews. The prophets had described it in vivid details. Isaias 53 is so accurate a prediction of the Passion that it is sometimes called a 5th Gospel. Psalm 21, quoted by Jesus on the cross, describes Him mocked and defied as He hangs there (vv. 6-8), even the very piercing of His hands and feet (v. 16). All was foretold, and all, says Peter, is now fulfilled.

The climax of the preaching is an earnest exhortation to repentance, a complete change of heart (v.19). Imagine we have been listening to that sermon. We see Peter, the cured man clinging to him; the people, many quite interested, some just curious, a few hostile. We hear Peter's bold and daring challenge, and contrast it with his former cowardice and timidity. We realize that He has a burning message to tell, that God loves us infinitely, and has raised us to a new life. We sense the urgency of that message, its demands, the force with which it overrides any and every difficulty. And we, like Peter's hearers,

respond, promising to "repent and turn again, so that our sins maybe blotted out, and that we may be refreshed from the presence of the Lord" (v. 19).

4th Sunday of Easter-tide (April 19)

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Last Sunday, you remember, we listened to St. Peter preaching, proclaiming Jesus' Resurrection and calling on us to throw in our lot with Him for good, to go "all out" for Him. We've just heard part of the sequel to that (Acts 4.8-12). Like any sermon, it had a mixed reception. Many gave themselves wholly over to Christ, bringing the total of men converts to 5,000 (v. 4). But the Temple authorities, Sadducees who refused to believe in survival after death, arrested Peter and John and left them in jail overnight. Next morning they were summoned and asked in whose name they had done such a sensational cure.

The cured cripple, who the day before had been leaping about and praising God, and was clinging to the Apostles at the time of their arrest, was right there with them (v. 10). He was a familiar figure, as he used to be carried daily to the Temple gate and used to spend the whole day begging from the worshippers coming and going (3.10). The spectacular miracle had the same purpose, as those done directly by Jesus — to show God's majesty in intimacy with human misery.

Peter, who had trembled before a servant maid, is fearless before the High Priest and his court. What had transformed him? The Holy Spirit, none other (v. 8). Jesus had said of coming persecutions — no need to prepare a defence; what we are to say will be given us in that hour, it will not be ourselves, but the Holy Spirit who will speak (Mt. 10.19-20).

Peter, declares that it is the Risen Savior who has worked this wonder. He repeats Our Lord's teaching (Lk. 20.17-18), that Christ is the cornerstone of the new house of Israel, and those who reject Him reject

their inheritance (v. 11). This was a favorite O.T. (Ps. 117.22) quotation with Peter—he quotes it again in his first papal encyclical 1 Pet. 2.7. Salvation, he declares, comes through unshakeable loyalty to the Person of Jesus Christ (v. 12).

We are given, in today's Gospel, Jo. 10.11-18, a picture of the Savior in His own words. The title He selects for Himself is that of the Good Shepherd. He pictures Himself as a Shepherd, He calls Himself a Shepherd.

So, incidentally does the O.T. Ps. 22 is well known, as it is often sung during communion: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall want for nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters, He restores my soul, etc." (vv. 1-3). Ps. 79 also: "O Shepherd of Israel, leading your people like a flock... come to save us" (vv. 1-2). Even more touching is the prophecy of Isaias: "He will feed His flock like a shepherd, He will gather the lambs in His arms, He will carry them in His bosom" (Is. 40.11). And, one last quotation from the Prophet Ezechiel: "Thus says the Lord God: 'Behold I, I Myself will search for My sheep... I will feed them... I Myself will be the Shepherd of My sheep... I will seek the lost and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled and I will strengthen the weak'" (E. 3.34).

Over and over again when describing Himself, Jesus uses the title and the picture of a shepherd. Many call the 15th Chapter of St. Luke "the Gospel within the Gospel." There Jesus faces those who charge Him with being too merciful to sinners. He asks them: "Which man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he takes it on his shoulders, rejoicing." He goes on to describe such a shepherd calling his friends to share his joy, and adds that every genuine conversion causes just such joy in heaven.

Since this is Jesus' favorite picture of Himself (as it was of the early Christians), it calls for reflection. Jesus' love for us His sheep is such that He is ready to give His life for us (v. 11). A hired man whose only interest is his salary abandons the sheep in face of danger.

Not so Jesus, the Good Shepherd (v.12). He has loving personal intimate knowledge of each one of His sheep (v. 14). This is the sublime ideal of pastoral self-forgetfulness set up for us priests—pray that we may constantly strive to have it realized in our lives. Then will His wish be fulfilled— one flock, one Shepherd (v. 16).

Here in the Philippines, since we have no first-hand knowledge of sheep and shepherds, we perhaps miss the full significance of the title Jesus chose for Himself. As animal go, sheep are some what dumb, they are timid, they panic easily. We are like that, too, even the smartest of us, if truth be told. We need a shepherd, to protect us, to see we don't die of starvation. Jesus is our Shepherd, and He will do all of these things for us. We have only one thing to do— shut off our pride, listen to Him, heed His voice (Jo. 10.3).

I'd like to conclude with a prayer from the Letter to the Hebrews: "May the God of peace, Who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus the great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good" (Heb. 13.26).

5th Sunday of Easter-tide (April 26)

VINE AND VINEDRESSER

The Acts of the Apostles, into which we are delving these days (Acts 9, 26-31) could well be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. It is not a systematic history of the early Church, it is more a description of the Holy Spirit at work, founding it and keeping it together as its divine life-giving Principle. St. Paul, who qualified as an Apostle because he had seen and heard the Risen Lord (v. 27), was an energetic herald of the power of the Spirit. And the spectacular spread of the Church is attributed to the same Holy Spirit (v. 31).

One of Jesus' images for Himself and His Church is that of a vine (Jo. VX, 1-8). We are all familiar with fruit-trees in which the life-producing sap comes up from the roots through the trunk, producing leaves and fruit in the healthy branches.

The Old Testament abounds in such examples. For instance, the Patriarch Jacob foretelling the expansion of his descendants, likens the tribe of Joseph to "a fruitful branch by a stream, his branches run over the wall" (Gen. 49,22). In the Prophet Isaias, God describes His people thus: "A vineyard on a very fertile hill, He digged it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines, and He looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes" (Is. V, 1-2). He reproaches the useless vines: "What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?" (v. 4)

The Psalms, too, take up the theme of God as a farmer devotedly tending a vine — His people. "You brought a vine out of Egypt... You cleared the land for it, it took deep root and filled the land... The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches, it sent out its branches to the sea" (Ps. 79. 8-11). As I said last Sunday of shepherds and sheep, it's a pity grapes don't grow here — we could then see at first hand how prolific a vine is, and how it responds to devoted cultivation. And how rightly a vinedresser is disappointed, if the vine degenerates. "I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you degenerated to become a wild vine?" (Jer. 2,21).

It is not surprising then that Jesus took the vine as His own image of His Church, the extension of Himself, the whole Christ. Its cultivation He attributes to His Father, the Vinedresser (v. 1). A barren branch, like Judas, is lopped off, the fruit-bearing branches are pruned by the pruning knife of trials. Relieved of useless and harmful excrescences, the vine grows more fruitful (v. 2). This had taken place in the Apostles through the words of Jesus throughout His ministry. (v.3). The essential condition for our producing fruit, or indeed possessing the Divine life at all, is our being vitally inserted in Christ. We know that a lopped-off branch begins immediately to wither — its only hope is to be re-ingrafted into the tree (v.4). A year before, Jesus told us that the Eucharist is to be the means of intensifying this vital adhesion to Himself and to one another (Jo. 6, 57).

Jesus' words: "Apart from Me, you can do nothing" i.e. nothing of value in the eyes of God, remind us that we cannot go it alone" (v.5) "No one comes to the Father but by Me." "No one knows the

Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son reveals Him." If we fail to remain incorporated into Christ, or should we have cut ourselves off from Him and fail to consent to our re-incorporation, we will wither to death, and be fit only for Hell (v. 6). "Aut vitis, aut ignis" (St. Augustine).

The Lord reminds us that *effective prayer* is the result of our union with Him, and then, it in its turn, is the indispensable means of growing in intimacy with him (v. 7). We abide in Him and He in us — it is not our weak voice that the Father hears, but the voice of His beloved Son, with Whom we are one. This is how we secure the Father's glory (v. 8), going to Him in prayer with and through Christ our Brother in Whom He is well pleased.

Prayer — intimacy with an Almighty God, would be a formidable idea if it were not for one thing. That thing is the prayer of Jesus. There is in Him the closest union of what is God and what is man. His manhood is what unites Him with us, making Him our Brother. But because He is also God, it is no problem for Him to think human thoughts of what His and our Father is like.

We are branches in the Vine, we are one with Christ, He longs to put us in touch with our Father. He leads us on to that God with Whom we could never become truly acquainted if left to ourselves.

The Holy Spirit, sent by the Risen Lord to sustain us, takes over our prayer. "For we know not what to pray for as we ought. But the Spirit prays in us, with groanings beyond all utterance". To be branches in the Vine, to be one with Christ is to be one with Christ's Spirit, praying in His Name and with His own prayer.

May His prayer weld us into a community of love, abiding in Him, and worshipping the Father in Spirit and in truth. Amen.