

Reflection for the 3rd Sunday of Easter

Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." (John 21:15)

In our Gospel Reading this Sunday taken from the Gospel of John we hear of Jesus providing St. Peter with an opportunity to embrace the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this Reading Simon Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James, John and two other disciples all go fishing on the Sea of Tiberius. After a night of fishing in which they catch nothing, Jesus, appears standing on the shore and asks them if they had caught anything, and they answer no, He then tells them to throw their net over the right side of the boat for a catch. They caught 153 large fish. Their boat was not far from shore, only about a hundred yards out when they made the catch. They come ashore and Jesus has a charcoal fire with fish and bread on it waiting for them. Jesus invites them to have breakfast.

Once the disciples had eaten, Jesus turns to Simon Peter and asks him not once but three times, "*Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?*" With this question Jesus is providing Simon Peter with a chance to write over what he had written on his heart the night of the Last Supper when he had not once, but three times claimed he did not know Jesus. This part of chapter 21 would appear to be the most important part of the chapter for in these four verses 15-19 we are witnessing the healing of St. Peter. Verses 1-14 of Chapter 21 appear to be leading up to this moment. We can even see that when St. Peter answers that he does love Jesus that our Lord responds to St. Peter by telling him to "*feed my lambs,*" Jesus has a plan and calling for St. Peter once he is made whole.

When we come to Jesus like St. Peter did and receive His forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, He also has a plan for us. He is calling us just like He called St. Peter to share the new beginning we have received with the whole world. Jesus is calling us to "*feed His lambs.*" Our Gospel Reading this Sunday is reminding us that The Sacrament of Penance is more than experiencing the forgiveness for our sins. In receiving God's forgiveness for our sins, we are being called by God to make a difference in this world.

It is important to note that the final four verses that seems so important to our Gospel Reading this Sunday are optional and would not have to be included in the Gospel Reading if the shorter form of the Gospel is chosen. With this information in mind, one might ponder if there is a different message that we can also take from this Gospel Reading. Looking once again at the first 14 verses of our Gospel Reading this Sunday, we can discover that St. John is not precise when he mentions just 5 of the 7 disciples by name or when he mentions that when they caught the fish, they were about a hundred yards from shore. But when St. John mentions in his Gospel the number of fish they catch he is very precise, it was 153 fish that were in the net. This is striking when you think of the fact that St. John is not able to mention all 7 disciples by name nor the precise distance they are from shore when they made the catch, but he does know the exact number of fish that were in the net. One explanation for the 153 fish is that it is a gematria, which is when a numerical value is assigned to a word or phrase, this is often done with Hebrew words. In the case of 153 it would become the Hebrew phrase "*Ani Elohim*" which means "*I am God.*" A challenge with this explanation for the 153 fish representing the Hebrew phrase "*Ani Elohim*" is that the Gospel of John was not written in Hebrew. Of course, St. John had Jewish roots and spoke Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. So, it is possible that he intended the 153 fish to have a deeper meaning that could have been "*Ani Elohim.*" Of course, the Holy Spirit might have been working through St. John providing a meaning for the 153 fish being caught.

If we choose to look for a message and a meaning in the 153 fish that the seven Disciples caught on the Sea of Tiberius the message of "*Ani Elohim, I am God,*" can make a great deal of sense. For this was the third time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after His resurrection and the last recorded appearance of Jesus

to His Disciples in the Gospel of John. Right before Jesus shares the Eucharist with His Disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberius, and before Christ provides St. Peter with the opportunity of forgiveness and healing, He provides them with a message of who He is, "*Ani Elohim, I am God.*" This message of who Jesus is explains why He can forgive the sins of St. Peter for He is God. This message also provides the explanation of why our sins can be forgiven by the Priest. Yes, Jesus did send the Apostles into the world to forgive sins, and in the Confessional the Priest is "*en persona de cristo,*" in the person of Christ. This is a key concept in Catholic theology that describes the priest's role in administering the Sacraments. The priest, through Holy Orders, is empowered to act in the place of Christ, making the Sacrament an action of Christ Himself.

So, Jesus at the Sea of Tiberius is giving us a very powerful message, that as God, He can and does forgive sins and through the forgiveness of sins calls us into a deeper relationship with Him. In this deeper relationship we are all invited to have a more active role in sharing our faith with the world. As Jesus told St. Peter, "*Feed my lambs,*" so he informs us to do the same.