

The Inclusive Community

Third Sunday of Easter

April 26, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Peace and Forgiveness

Luke 24:35-48

It is not a fairy tale.

In part, it seems like one but it is not.

For one thing, there are more details than a fairy tale needs.

The disciples, and they are “the disciples,” not just the Eleven. This occurs with and for the whole church and not only for the leaders. In any case, the disciples share “broiled fish” with the Risen Christ. “Broiled fish” was common in Galilee but not in Jerusalem where, even today, it is rare.

The process of acceptance is prolonged. In a fairy tale, it would be automatic or quick.

The subject is Christ but the focus is on the disciples, less on what the disciples experience than on what they are to make of it.

Luke tells us, up front, that they do not find the apparition comforting or even clear. In his words, they are “startled,” then “terrified,” strong words, and finally, conclude that this is not Jesus of Nazareth or the Easter Christ but a “ghost.”

Luke seems to be saying that they wish this were not happening to them. They would rather be somewhere else.

The apparition calls them, not to wonder or awe, but to rather pedestrian tasks. “Let’s have lunch. Do you have any fish? Could we all sit down around the table and eat together?”

When Christ speaks, it is not about faith or the future or even about the betrayal and execution. Luke has Christ address the fact that they are unsettled, afraid, panic-stricken. (We do not see ghosts except in a state bordering on hysteria.) He tells them he knows they are frightened. They are riddled with what Christ calls “doubts.”

All this is not the stuff of fairy tales. It is about human emotions and about an experience most people would rather miss.

This passage is not so much about the apparitions as it is about a fourth journey.

It is not unlike the way we come to believe in the persons we marry and love.

Love is startling. Something about it is surprising even in those cases where it is predictable. Love scares us. We do not want it not to be there and yet we are unsettled by the cost it brings with it. Brides and grooms are seldom settled at a wedding ceremony. They shake and tremble and cry. They are glad they are at the wedding and they want it to be finished. In the process of falling in love, we disbelieve and question and doubt, not only the other but also ourselves, uncertain about whether this is all true or if the other really knows us or if we really know ourselves.

We reach a point which Luke describes brilliantly, saying that we sometimes are so happy that this may be true that we disbelieve it. The first thing someone asks when the news is really good is whether this is true. Or are we seeing phantoms or ghosts? We actually ask: am I dreaming?

Dante, in the Divine Comedy, describes this state of mind perceptively when, in one line, he writes that we often believe and disbelieve at the same time about the same experience.

It is clear, this late in the game, that nothing Jesus once said prepared them for this or helped them accept it. There is nothing Jesus did, even granted all the miracles and preaching, that prepared the disciples for this. Indeed, Luke tells us, even seeing the apparition did not help. They are left in a state of anxiety and denial. They are left to figure it out with an act of faith. This is exactly the condition we are in when we decide to risk everything on a relationship of love that gives us no certitude or guarantees.

Luke tells us that the disciples then and we now are in the same place. We have to sort out Easter with an act of faith.

We suppose that had we seen Jesus of Nazareth, heard the preaching, witnessed a miracle, saw the empty tomb and encountered an apparition that it would be easy to believe. Yet, the disciples had all this going for them and it made no decisive difference.

Again, like falling in love, all the guarantees and the reasons, all the testimony of friends, all the experience with the other, do not take away the risk, the anxiety, the doubts, the uncertainty.

The three things that convince the disciples that they will believe are all available to us now:

The first is that they are convinced they are forgiven. They do not feel worthy of forgiveness and they do not know why they would be forgiven but they are convinced that they are. That feeling of forgiveness is so much like what Jesus created when he was with others.

The second is the fact that they feel compelled to sit around a table, in equality, with everyone. Table fellowship was the key sacrament or sign or symbol of what Christ wanted. They wanted to gather together, break bread, share memories, even broiled fish. They wanted friendship with and from everyone. No hierarchies. No exclusions.

The third experience is a sense of deep peace. They can hear Christ say “peace” in their hearts. The terror and the denial diminish and they come to believe that this was a peace they could not have achieved without Christ.

Is there any better way to meet Christ than in the experience of forgiveness, breaking bread in friendship and in peace? No apparition is more powerful than that or substitutes for it.

I see the Risen Christ in everyone I forgive, in everyone I love and in the peace that comes from both.