Third Sunday of Easter April 14, 2024

            Three weeks ago, you folks in the pews had the worst part of our liturgy.  Three weeks ago, the celebration was Palm Sunday of the Lord’s Passion.  You remember, the Passion was proclaimed with a narrator, a priest playing the role of Jesus, a lector doing the other parts, and you folks taking the role of the crowds.  You had to call out, “Crucify Him!  Crucify Him!”  I’m sure not everyone enjoyed having to act that part.  Can you imagine if you really were there in that horrible praetorium demanding that Pilate send Jesus to be tortured to death?  Certainly, when you heard the report about His resurrection, you would have thought, “If this is true, and Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God, I’m doomed.”  Even worse, if you were one of the temple priests fanning the crowd into a frenzy, you would think that there was no chance you would escape the fires of hell.  But St. Peter in today’s first reading, tells the people who were in that crowd, including those who led them, that if they repented and are converted to Christ, their sins will be wiped away.  He reminded them that even though they had demanded Barabbas over Jesus, “You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you,” God would not give up on them or on anyone. He knew that they didn’t fully understand what they were doing.  They just had to repent their sins and turn to Christ.

            This is how great God’s mercy is.  People who had demanded Jesus’ death are forgiven if they repent and accept Christ.  It is sad that some of us think that our sins are so terrible that God would not forgive them.  Why would we deny Him that power, that love which He wishes to shower on us?     Nothing that we have done could ever be as bad as demanding Jesus’ death. We need to stop focusing on our sinful actions or inactions.  We need to focus on God’s love and mercy.

            In today’s second reading St. John says that Jesus is the expiation for our sins and those of the whole world.  First of all, what does that word expiation mean? The word refers to a sacrifice to atone or make up for sin.  This might seem like a highly theological term, but we do this all the time.  We just don’t call it atonement.  For example, a husband or wife or a child is sorry for snapping at members of the family. He or she makes up for it with a little gift or a special meal or perhaps doing some chores that are not a part of his or her normal responsibilities. These are minor things, but they are acts of expiation, acts of making up. Leviticus 16 presents a major act of atonement.    Moses’ brother Aaron is told to bring a goat into the sanctuary and place his hands over it, calling upon it the sins of the people.  The goat is then sent into the wilderness.  The goat represents their sins.  He is sacrificed by being brought out into the wilderness. The sacrifice is meant to make up for sins.

            This is also a prophecy of Jesus’ gift of Himself to the Father for us. Jesus is also brought outside the temple area to die. He is the sacrificial victim who takes all sin upon himself.  His sacrifice makes us "at one" with God.

            Many times, we will say, “Give your sins to the Lord.  Let Jesus have them.”  St. John is telling us that Jesus wants them.  He knows that we ourselves cannot make up or atone for the horrible actions of sin, but He knows that He can and will. Nor does He want us suffering the guilt of our sins. So, we give our sins to Him and are made one with God by Him.

            In the Gospel, St. Luke presents Jesus appearing in the Upper Room and opening the minds of the disciples to understand the Scripture that Christ would suffer, die and rise again so that repentance for the forgiveness of sins might be preached to the whole world.  This is Easter.  Sin no longer will have a hold on us.  Christ, the Victor over death is also the Victor over sin.  The world needs to hear this from His disciples, from us.  This brings us back to the second reading, Jesus is the expiation not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world. We are given the mandate to proclaim the good news that if we are united to Jesus, His sacrifice will unite each of us and all of us to God.

            Some people think that the Lord saved them, but not other people.  They think that people of a certain class, with a certain disease, or who have committed this or that sin are excluded from the Lord’s salvation.  So, they categorize whole groups of people as damned, or, at least, as evil.   This is not the way of Christ.  If we dare to look closely within ourselves, we will probably find some form of prejudice in each of us. We must fight against whatever prejudices we might have.   No group is better or worse than any other group.  Jesus is our expiation for our sins and for those of the whole world.

            Today’s readings warn us not to be so arrogant as to think that we have done something that can’t be forgiven. Nor should we be so arrogant to think that others cannot be forgiven.  God’s mercy is available for all.

            Jesus gives.  He forgives. And He calls us to follow Him.