3 Easter C 2022

It should come as no surprise that today’s liturgy turns us in several directions. It’s focus has to do with being an apostle. An apostle of love: Peter, and of course, you and me. Three facets of Peter’s life emerge from today’s Gospel: his rehabilitation, his commission, and his destiny.

You recall that late Holy Thursday evening, on the way to the Mount of Olives, Jesus warned His disciples that they would fall away and be scattered; warned Peter that Satan would shake him; told Peter he could not follow his Master now.

Peter took issue with Jesus. Even if all others fell away, he would not. Even to follow Jesus, he was ready for prison and death. Jesus predicted that before the cock crowed, Peter would three times deny Him. Peter responded that he would die rather than deny.

The fact? While Jesus was moving through His passion, Peter denied Jesus three times: denied that he had been with Jesus in the Garden; denied he was one of His disciples; denied he knew Jesus, denied it with curses and an oath. The cock crowed. Jesus looked at Peter. Peter remembered what the Lord has said. Peter wept bitterly.

But a touching scene in today’s Gospel. Peter is rehabilitated, restored. The triple denial is now undone with Jesus’ thrice-repeated, *“Do you love Me?”* and Peter’s threefold, *“You know that I love you.”*

Peter is once again the disciple he denied being. He feels the love that makes for discipleship. His repentance is obvious. He insists passionately that he does indeed love. He is hurt that Jesus asks three times. Unlike the earlier Peter, he will not boast that he loves more than others. He simply asks Jesus to read his heart: *“Lord, You know everything. You know that I love you?”*

The rehabilitation leads to a commission. Peter is sent. Sent on mission. To feed Christ’s flock. Not because Peter is worthy. Peter was chosen because God works through *“the weak things of the world to shame the strong.”*

If there is a special authority here -- to lead, to teach, to correct -- it is not on power, but on service. Service that is understood in the First Letter of Peter: *“Tend the flock of God that is in your care, exercising your role of overseer, not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for base gain, but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge, but by being examples to the flock.”*

Peter’s model is the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd calls his sheep by name, goes before them, lays down his life for them. Here is Peter’s destiny. The commission leads to a cross. Jesus proclaims to Peter what his life of loving shepherding holds for him. He will die a bloody death. In fact, he will stretch out his hands on a cross, after the manner of his Lord. From conversion to commission to crucifixion. Here is life and death for the apostle.

And what about you? Conversion, commission, and crucifixion initiated your Christian existence, your Franciscan vocation. In your Baptism you died to sin and self, you rose to God, to *“newness of life.”* At your profession you said—three times—this is what I want!

Newness of life. At that moment Christ our Lord turned you to Himself *and* turned you to the world. Your conversion, from your baptism to your profession, was your commission to live the Gospel in its crucifying fullness, to bring the Gospel to flame in your heart and in the hearts of those to whom you give witness to Gospel living. Baptism commissioned you an apostle. You are sent. At your profession, a Franciscan, sent into the world.

But let’s take a deep breath for a moment. Between baptism and profession—“life happened.” Many years have fled since then. If you want to uncover how Christian and how Franciscan your existence has been, consult the 3-C’s: conversion, commission, crucifixion.

Has your life been a constant conversion, a turning toward Christ? Have you conformed your life to His? Pope Francis says, in Fratelli Tutti, *“life exists where there is bonding, communion, and fraternity. Life is stronger than death when it is built on true relationships and bonds of fidelity.”* (FT 87). A person’s spiritual stature is measured by love. If Jesus were to ask: *“Do you love Me?”* Would you respond: *“Lord, You know everything. You know well that I love You.”* At times we fail to live the logic of that love. Sometimes our actions do not engage us as a total person.

And what of that commission? the apostolate. Each of us is on mission. There are no exceptions. We can indeed dodge responsibilities. If we are not bringing Christ anywhere, to anyone, then it would be more honest to reply, *“No, Lord, I do not really love You.”*

Of crucifixion I need say little. The cross is inescapable. You alone know the cross you bear, what nails crucify you. The cross is there for each of us to embrace. And befriend. The unvarnished truth is that salvation comes through crucifixion -- yours as well as Christ’s.

I sense our response to Jesus raises an agonizing issue. If we are what we say we are, if we turned—in crucifying love—to Christ and His flock, then why is the world we inhabit still filled with hurt and hate, of injustice and oppression, of loneliness and lovelessness?

Our mission is not a “mission impossible.” Conforming our life to Christ reveals the orientation of the Paschal Mystery in the Franciscan vocation. It is this willingness to imitate Him according to the letter and the spirit of the Gospel, being steadfast in reproducing His deeds of mercy and tenderness.

The crucified and risen Lord of life journeys with us. Jesus is with us.