

## FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

All of us have various affiliations, whether to clubs, political parties, athletic teams, or the like. If you ever want to learn about the affiliations of someone whom you don't know well, there are two general ways of finding out. One is to listen to that person's words so as to find out what he or she is committed to and really believes in, and the other is to observe his or her behavior. This latter way is perhaps the better of the two, at least if you accept the old proverb that actions speak louder than words.

Well, about twenty centuries ago, pagans who did not know much about the new religious movement that came to be called Christianity likewise had two ways of finding out what it was all about: they could ask the followers of Christ what they really believed in, and they could observe the way they lived. To oversimplify a bit, what the early Christians *believed* was that Jesus of Nazareth was truly the Son of God, raised from the dead and still present with them both in the Eucharist and in the least of their brothers and sisters. As for the way they *lived*, at least at their best, this was summed up by what some Roman pagans said of them: "See how these Christians love one another."

Jesus' own teaching about how his followers are to live is nicely summed up toward the end of today's Gospel, where he says to his disciples at the Last Supper: "This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). And just how are we to do this? By following his own example, as he says just one verse earlier: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (Jn 13:34; cf. Jn 15:12). I would therefore like to reflect in this homily on love and some related realities, and to begin I

want to quote two sentences from St. Bernard of Clairvaux's treatise *On Loving God*. That great medieval saint once wrote, "Love is one of the four natural passions. There is no need to name them, for they are well known." Well, they may have been well known to readers of his day, but I had to look them up in another source, and I expect you would have to do the same. I'll save you the trouble by saying that the medievals considered the four natural passions to be love, fear, joy, and sorrow.

What most interests me—and I hope you as well—is the interrelationship among these four basic emotions, out of which all the other emotions are traditionally said to be composed. Joy and sorrow are clearly incompatible. If one of these two prevails in your life, the other will to that extent be absent. As Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, "You will be made sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy" (Jn 16:20). On the other hand, joy and love go hand-in-hand, for joy is defined as the emotion that accompanies the possession or expectation of something that is greatly desired, and what could be more desired than God, who is himself love (1 Jn 4:8, 16)?

What about fear? How does it relate to some of these other basic emotions? St. John again helps us here, for he tells us perfect love casts out fear (1 Jn 4:18)—a truth repeated by St. Benedict at the end of his treatment of humility in the seventh chapter of his Rule—and we could go on to say that the joy that accompanies perfect love is likewise incompatible with fear. This is actually the main point I want to make. You might recall that some thirty-five years ago, when Cardinal Karol Wojtyla was elected pope, practically his first words to the whole world were ones that the risen Christ had once spoken to his disciples: "Be not afraid." More than any other season of the church's year, this Easter season is one when we need not be afraid of anything, for it is

preeminently a season of joy. There are five prefaces from which the priest may choose for use in Masses during this season, but every single one of them contains the following words addressed to God: “We praise you with greater joy than ever in this Easter season, when Christ became our paschal sacrifice,” as well as the words, “The joy of the resurrection renews the whole world.”

The joyful fearlessness I’m talking about is very evident in Jesus’ disciples after the first Pentecost. We heard in our first reading that after Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed the good news in Derbe they returned to Lystra. That doesn’t sound remarkable, but it does if you note that in immediately the preceding verses, not included in today’s Lectionary reading, Luke writes that it was precisely in Lystra that Paul had been stoned by some angry Jews from Antioch, dragged out of the city, and left for dead. Yet now we find him going right back there. Still earlier he had had to flee the city of Iconium because of a mob, but none of this, or any of the other dangers that he faced, even came close to making him abandon the preaching of the Gospel. There was no place in his heart or mind for fear, so full was he of joy. It would, in fact, be very instructive to go through St. Paul’s letters simply noting all the times that he speaks of his joy. Here are just a few examples. To the Romans he writes: “I urge you ... to join me in the struggle by your prayers to God on my behalf ... so that I may come to you with joy by the will of God and be refreshed together with you” (Rom 15:30-32). In one of his most personal letters, his second to the Corinthians, he writes: “I am filled with encouragement; I am overflowing with joy all the more because of all our affliction” (2 Cor 7:4). To his favorite community, the one in the Greek city of Philippi, he writes:

“My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord, beloved” (Phil 4:1). I could go on about St. Paul’s joy, but you get the point.

The really important thing is to realize and be convinced that the same joyful confidence can be ours. Yes, things may and often will go wrong in our lives. We may make mistakes, even serious ones, whether in our families, our workplaces, or elsewhere, but if we trust in God’s help we need never fear. Instead, we will be able to take heart in the words of God addressed to all of us through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah, words that have also been set to music in a slightly different version and are sometimes sung at liturgies: “Be not afraid, for I have redeemed you.... When you pass through the water, I will be with you; in the rivers you shall not drown. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned; the flames shall not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior” (Is 43:1-3).

Even as we may rightly take heart at these words, we may know other persons around us who need to hear them, persons who may be despondent at the loss of a loved one, or the breakup of a marriage, or the loss of job, or a medical diagnosis of some serious illness. Our Christian faith is not Pollyannaish. We know that things can go wrong, that some mornings we’d just as soon stay in bed, but we also know that ultimately the Lord never lets us be tempted beyond our strength. As St. Paul writes in the beautiful eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, “What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?... No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us” (Rom 8:35-37). Let us take heart in these words, and in whatever ways

possible help others who may be oppressed by sorrow or fear to know the love of God that casts out all fear and turns all sorrow and grief into year-round Easter joy.