

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Easter

APRIL 14, 2013 - VILLA PALAZZOLA

I would like to begin by thanking all of you for your warm reception this morning. I am very grateful also to Monsignor Stock who, on behalf of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, invited me to be here with you today. It is a joy for me to be able to pray with all of you here, my brother bishops, of course, and you priests and seminarians who are also here in such good numbers.

God's Word today shows us a journey. Not only the journey of the Church from her first days to her final victory as the Heavenly Jerusalem; but also the Apostles' journey of faith. Faith is always a journey, and we ask God, especially during this Year of Faith, to renew us on our journey so that we may better help others on theirs.

Our journey of faith leads us today to the Risen Christ, who is waiting for us upon the shore, just as He waited for His Apostles. And if we look at the Apostles who are upon the shore with Jesus, we can see that they are not unlike ourselves. We see in them not only our strengths, but also our weaknesses; our courage, our fidelity and our zeal stand side-by-side with our fragility, our doubt and our pride.

What happens in the personal encounter with Jesus on the shore? We see that Jesus first speaks. He asks questions, questions that make the Apostles uncomfortable: "Have you caught anything?" and "Peter, do you love me?" Peter and the Apostles were fishing. Fishing was what they knew best; it was a skill and a trade they were good at. And yet it is here in this place of security and control where they meet failure and frustration. They had caught *nothing*; their nets were *empty*. Peter had denied Jesus. Jesus' questions reveal the Apostles' weakness and failure, but at the same time lead them to a deeper and more intimate relationship of trust with the Lord. Through the uncomfortable questions, Peter and his brother Apostles come to encounter the Risen Christ and enter into deeper communion with Him. How can they enter into His love and intimate friendship if they do not allow Him to cut away from their hearts all that which gets in the way?

Brothers, there is nothing more important than our personal relationship with Jesus, who every day asks you and me the question he asked St. Peter, “Do you love me?” He wants us to remain in Him as His most intimate friends. What is our response to Him? To enter into this time of renewal, I would encourage all of you to enter into the uncomfortable questions, allowing Jesus’ words to have their intended effect.

Pope Francis, also makes us feel uncomfortable. One thing I have noticed, even in my personal meetings with him, is that Pope Francis’ sole criterion is Jesus Christ. The Holy Father does not get distracted by peripheral considerations. He goes to the heart of things with simplicity and boldness. You recall that just two days after his election he said to the Cardinal Electors gathered in Rome: “If we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church, the Bride of the Lord.... When we do not profess Jesus Christ, we profess the worldliness of the devil, a demonic worldliness” (*Homily from Missa pro Ecclesia with the Cardinal Electors*, March 14, 2013).

Yet the verbal surgery of the Incarnate and Risen Word and of His Vicar has a point: having cut away what is not of Jesus Christ, we can encounter Him and be united with Him in love and intimate friendship. Exposing the weakness and failure is the condition of possibility for creating communion with the Risen Christ and sharing in His Easter joy. Without having listened to Our Lord on the shore, the Apostles would have been left with empty nets. But it is listening to Him, trusting him and acting on His will – that is only known through real conversation with him – that their efforts bear fruit. And it is in this obedience that the Lord shows His power and, we could say with the Psalmist, “turns their mourning into dancing” (Psalm 30) by filling their nets and by healing the wound of Peter’s threefold denial. And the Apostles become obedient witnesses of this power.

Yet as St. Peter discovers, the encounter with Jesus on the shore and the food He shares with him is not only for him and the Apostles. It is also for Jesus’ lambs and His sheep. Real love for Him, Jesus is telling Peter, has to be shown in love for others, love shown in deeds of self-giving and service. The Venerable Bede, commenting on today’s Gospel, reminds us

of this. He writes: “[T]he Lord added at the end of each inquiry [to Peter], ‘Feed my sheep,’ or ‘Feed my lambs,’ as if he were clearly saying: ‘There is only one true proof of wholehearted love of God – if you strive to exercise care by labouring solicitously on behalf of your brothers’” (Bede the Venerable, *Homily II.22 on the Gospels*).

On the shore Jesus feeds his Apostles. He gives nourishment in their hunger, using the very food they, as obedient collaborators, have caught with Him and because of Him. Jesus also feeds us in Holy Communion. His “Come, have breakfast” to the Apostles is heard by us every day as “Come, be fed by my Body and my Blood.” It is a food of which we are also collaborators, and it is a food that nourishes us and gives us strength to feed Jesus’ lambs and His sheep, which include our priests, our deacons, our consecrated men and women and our lay faithful. And the manner with which we serve them reveals our love for Jesus.

My brother bishops, you face many challenges in your apostolic ministry in England and Wales. Perhaps you can identify with Peter and John as they are dragged before the Sanhedrin to be pressured, threatened and even beaten to stop proclaiming the saving Truth of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you can sense viscerally the pressure to obey men rather than God, to see yourself as a mere manager or functionary rather than a disciple and an apostle. It is good, then, that you will have this important week to encounter the Lord together. Just as the Risen Lord called the Apostles from the boat to the shore, He has also called all of you to the shore of this place for a time of renewal. The Risen Lord is calling you to this shore because He knows that authentic interior renewal can only happen in the personal encounter with Him, not as an abstract deity, but in His risen flesh on the shore. And so He calls you.

When you return home refreshed by prayer and rest in the Lord, let the joyful presence of the Risen Christ in your heart become an open space for your sheep or even a shore where He can meet them and give them love and hope. Amen.

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