

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter A

“Finding Peace”

Fr. Frank Schuster

About 17 years ago, my seminarian classmates from Chicago and I made a pilgrimage to Rome. The highlight of the trip was when we were invited to attend daily mass with Pope John Paul II. I will never forget that day. We were greeted by Swiss Guard at the bronze gates near the entrance of St. Peter’s and ushered through the labyrinth of the Vatican. Soon we were in the papal library being led single file down a hallway at the other end of the room. Soon we were in the Pope’s private chapel, and there he was kneeling in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. After about five minutes of prayer, he stood up slowly as his Parkinson’s was fairly advanced by then, shuffled around to face us, and greeted us with a smile and the sign of the cross. Daily Mass had begun.

Afterwards, we were lined up back in the papal library. Soon, the Pope appeared to meet us, began by smiling and waving his hand in the air saying, “Chicago!” His joy was contagious. It was his joy, in the midst of his Parkinson’s disease that struck me most. That, and his sky blue eyes. He had remarkable light blue eyes. And, big hands. Huge hands. He made his way down the line to meet each one of us, giving each one of us a rosary which I still have. When he came to me, he asked me, “Are you the superior?” This made us laugh. I wanted to say, “Yes, I am”, but I was speechless. My mom always said that if the Pope was ever in need of a miracle for canonization, the fact that I was speechless should count for two.

The funniest moment was when one of our classmates tried to impress the pope by saying “good morning, Holy Father” in Polish. I don’t know what came out of his mouth, could have been “Good morning, Holy Mother”, but whatever it was, the Pope laughed, gave him a friendly pat on his cheek and said, “stick to English”. It was a wonderful day and a wonderful memory I will always cherish.

When my parents retired, we scheduled a trip to Rome. It took months to plan. It was by happenstance, or by grace, that we arrived in Rome the day after John Paul II died. After settling in to our B & B, we quickly made our way to the line up outside St. Peter’s to pay our respects to John Paul II who was lying in state in the basilica. There were banners everywhere saying, “Santo subito”, which is colloquial Italian that means, “Saint right now!” It was a wonderful experience for my parents and I to spend our trip to Rome celebrating the life of a saint.

What made John Paul a saint? You can read a library full of books and articles on the matter. For me, what made him a saint was his joy in the midst of being profoundly disabled from Parkinson’s disease. His joy not only lit up the room I met him in. His joy lit up the world. He didn’t use his infirmity as an

excuse to become depressed. He instead chose to be joyful, perhaps even defiantly joyful, and use his infirmity as a tool to spread the Gospel.

In the Gospel this weekend, Jesus says, "Peace be with you". Please understand, the disciples had every reason to not to feel peace. They were fugitives. There were mobs looking for them, threatening to take their lives. When Jesus was arrested, they fled. Something happened to cause them to reunite for the sake of the Gospel. That something was the resurrection of the Lord. And when Jesus appears to them, despite everything that had happened, Jesus says, "Peace be with you". And despite all the dangers, the disciples felt overwhelming joy.

Now many of us can relate with Thomas at times. He was not present with the other disciples the first time Jesus appeared to them. He tells them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." We have all been there. The risen Lord appears again and obliges Thomas' request. After seeing with his own eyes, Thomas addresses Jesus with the only suitable title, "My Lord and my God." Jesus' next words are haunting and they are directed towards us, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

How do we see Jesus? My friends, how do we see Jesus? Jesus gave us a hint in today's Gospel reading when he says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me so I send you." You see, the word "sent" shows up a number of times in the Gospel of John. Jesus says that he was sent by the Father, "not to do my will, but the will of the one who sent me." When the man who was blind since birth regains his sight, he does so by going to the Pool of Siloam, which means "sent". Jesus also promises to send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to strengthen his disciples and Church. The theology of sending in the Gospel of John has a two-fold meaning.

First, there is the relationship we have to the one sending us from the waters of baptism, giving us spiritual sight to be one with the sender. Second, there is the mission we have been given to the world around us that is at times hostile to the message being sent. ( James Mc Polin, S.J. "John" pg. 133) And so, how do we see Jesus? We see Jesus in each other by the measure our lives reflect being sent by Jesus by our baptism into the Body of Christ.

A great example is the lives of the saints. Millions of people are in Rome this weekend because the lives of John XXIII and John Paul II reflected the life of Jesus. We can see Jesus in the people in our lives as well when their lives reflect the joy and peace of the Gospel. Case in point. Before I left for a few days off this week following Easter, I anointed a number of parishioners who were nearing death. Two of them, Alma and Diane, passed away a couple days later. The third is still with us. All of them squeezed by hand after my blessing, thanked me, blessed me, promising to pray for me in heaven. My last memories of Alma and Diane are their smiles to me. Even in the midst of a terrible, life ending infirmity, they could smile. Do you think I saw Jesus in all of their eyes? Yes, I did.

In the midst of impending persecution, Jesus appears before the disciples and says “Peace be with you.” How do we find peace in life? We can take a hint from the witness of St. Thomas and find a way to trust in Jesus. That is the greatest witness I think that St. Faustina gives the Church in her vision of the Risen Christ, something to remember on Divine Mercy Sunday.

Under the portrait of her vision of Jesus are the words, Jesus I trust in you. I may not know where my life is going, but Jesus, I trust in you. I may be wracked with infirmity, but Jesus I trust in you. The cross I am carrying at work or at home may feel unbearable, but Jesus I trust in you. My friends, the Gospel invites us to trust in Jesus.

How do we begin? We begin by seeing Christ in others, especially those who choose to be defiantly joyful despite the crosses they carry, people like the apostles, St. Faustina, St. John XXIII, St. John Paul II, and, of course, Alma and Diane. That is how we find peace.