

Fourth Sunday of Easter - Year B - 2009

1. I can remember it like it was yesterday, thought it was really now almost 10 years ago.
 - a. Cardinal O'Connor, standing at the lectern in the dining room of St. Joseph's Seminary.
 - i. Now this dining room could easily seat 300.
 - ii. However there were about 60 there that evening; the entire student body of St. Joseph's plus the faculty.
 - b. He was upbeat that evening, boasting that he was putting into action a plan that would fill the seminary with young men by 2005.
 - i. One guy leaned over and whispered, "what, is he going to turn this place into bar?"
 - ii. Looking around at our small number, we wondered, is this man blind?
(1) But said nothing.
2. I remember it like it was yesterday, though it really was only a 5 years ago.
 - a. Cardinal Egan joking at a mass at the Cathedral that soon there would be so many ordinations to the priesthood at St. Patrick's Cathedral that they would need a bigger one.
 - i. He said this at the height of the revelations about the sexual abuse scandal which continues to rock our church.
 - ii. At a time when the media was practically unanimous in calling the celibate priesthood a breeding ground for pedophiles.
 - iii. Looking at one another, my brother priests wondered, "is this man deaf?"
(1) But said nothing.
3. I remember it like it was yesterday, and in fact it was. I was at the first priest council meeting with our new archbishop and the topic of the seminary came up.
 - a. And finally we heard the facts
 - i. If in May 2009 everyone who could retire from active ministry did, of the 411 parishes of the Archdiocese, there would be 47 openings for new pastors.
 - ii. This year there will be 3 ordinations to priest for our diocese
 - iii. And in two years we will have a year where no one is ordained.
 - iv. But of course our Spanish language vocations director is traveling to South America to recruit vocations. So the situation in a few ears won't be that critical.
(1) And I thought "don't they realize it already is?" But said nothing.
4. But of course they don't. Oh, they see the smaller number of priests; they hear the criticism of the priesthood which imputes the guilt of a few priests to all. And of course those statistics I heard came from the Archdiocese itself.
 - a. But the response to facts is to engage in fiction
 - i. and to deny what they see,
 - ii. ignore what they hear and be ignorant of what they know.
5. And they are not the first religious leaders to have done so.

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- a. For St. Peter in today's first reading recounts to the people of Israel how they had put Jesus to death.
 - i. According to Paul
 - ii. anyone could hear that he was righteous,
 - iii. that he was better than Barabbas,
 - iv. Anyone who had listened to him knew that he was he was God's chosen one,
 - v. And yet they were certain that he was not. For They knew Moses and the prophets. They memorized the psalms. They knew their traditions better than anyone, and thus they were certain Jesus couldn't be what he plainly was.
- 6. But before we think that Peter is criticizing the people listening him that day, we need to remember something.
 - a. Peter was one of the 12.
 - i. He had seen Jesus, he had heard him; he had lived with him and known him.
 - (1) If anyone should have certainly known who Jesus was, it was Peter.
 - (a) But when Jesus was arrested he abandoned Jesus, and denied he even knew him.
 - (b) So evidently even Peter the first Pope, could be blind , deaf and ignorant when it came to Jesus.
 - (2) And thus he does not judge the people of Israel in Acts, but stands judged by the same criteria he applies to them.
- 7. Except for one thing.
 - a. Peter was present on that first Easter evening, when two disciples rushed in the door confirming earlier rumors that people had seen Jesus risen from the dead.
 - i. It does not say what the disciples thought about these reports,
 - ii. but when Jesus appears in their midst we know.
 - (1) For the disciples are adults.
 - (a) They know people don't just rise from the dead.
 - (2) But they are also first century adults.
 - (a) And thus if a person were to come back from the grave,
 - (i) the only way they would do it is as a ghost.
 - (3) And thus they were certain that this is what Jesus was; a ghost.
 - b. But then Jesus lets them touch him, he asks for food and then
 - i. Takes the Moses the disciples had heard and the prophets they had read and the psalms they had sung since childhood and showed them that despite what they were taught all their lives,
 - (1) all of it pointed to Jesus, how is was supposed to suffer and die and then rise again.
 - c. The Gospel writer calls this process opening the disciples minds;

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- i. But if they needed to be opened that was because they were closed.
 - ii. And what closed them was the same thing that closed the minds of the people in the first reading: certainty.
 - (1) And we also see what caused this certainty: it was fear. Fear that Jesus was just another old revolutionary, just another old criminal just another old liar.
 - (a) Their certainty about who Jesus was; that he was something old, blinded them to who he truly was, and that God was in Jesus doing something new.
8. Nowadays we assume that certainty and faith are essentially equal.
- a. One has to be certain about Church teaching, certain about what we believe, certain we believe it.
 - i. And there is no doubt that there is much that is true about that.
 - (1) And yet in the 21st century as in the first,
 - (a) Certainty and fear are often equal
 - (i) for a certainty borne out of fear can blind us.
 - (ii) it can deafen us. It can make ignorant.
 - (iii) and that is precisely its purpose
 - (iv) Which is perhaps why Cardinals O'Connor and Egan were never more certain about full seminaries and sanctuaries than when they were empty,
 - (v) And our church never more insistent on its doctrine, than when people have abandoned it.
9. But maybe today the first century can teach the 21st
- a. That it was the breaking of their old certainties
 - b. That transformed the disciples into the Apostles,
 - i. transformed many who listened to Peter that day into believers,
 - ii. and a little on in the book of acts
 - c. transformed the life of a Pharisee named Saul into the Apostle Paul.
 - i. For even if our Church leaders cannot open their minds to uncertainty that leads to faith. We here at St. Gregory's must.
 - (1) for when we do we open our minds, our eyes, our ears and pout hearts, to see things as they really are, then we see that all the empty seminaries and sanctuaries, the continuing saga of scandals, the dwindling number of priests and all the rumors of parish consolidations and closings are simply God doing what God always does; preparing the way to make all things new.
 - (2) And brothers and sisters; that is no reason for fear
 - (3) That is reason for hope.