

Homily For Saturday of the Fifth Week of Easter - Year II

St Peter's 8:30am (virtual) Mass - May 16, 2020

Acts 16:1-10 "They delivered for observance, the decisions reached by the Apostles and elders."

Psalm 100:1-5 "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth."

John 15:18-21 "I have chosen you out of the world. Therefore, the world hates you."

The Mark of the Christian

Introduction

We could probably each come up with our own list for defining what is a Christian. What is the 'mark' of a person's life that you can look at it and say, that person is a real follower of Jesus, not just a pretender?

Years ago, I was asked by a friend if I would say he was a Christian. The answer was to settle an argument about whether he should be regularly attending church on Sunday, which he wasn't, or whether he could depend on the fact that he had been baptized and grew up in the faith. After many years, I think I finally have a better answer than I did then. Is baptism, or even weekly mass, enough? No, it's not, and today's readings tell us why.

The Old Mark: Circumcision

A very strange thing happens in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Paul circumcised his new fellow evangelizer, Timothy. He did this after he had been preaching for years already that, if you want to depend on this outward mark as the sign of being part of God's covenant people, then you put yourself outside of the saving action of Jesus Christ.

Scripture scholars debate why Paul did this. It looks like the reason is that Timothy, even though his father was a Gentile, was defined as a Jew, being born of a Jewish mother. It was not that Paul believed Timothy needed circumcision to be justified by God, but so he could have more credibility with those in the synagogues to whom the two of them were offering the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Baptism: The New Circumcision

The old mark of being part of the covenant people was only for men. Those men could say, I am a member of God's holy people, and yet ignore justice and true worship of the heart. That is why you will often read that this was not enough, and that one must really exhibit what in both old and new testaments is frequently called the 'circumcision of the heart'.

So, there is something about the disposition of our hearts towards God that defines this mark. Even our baptism must be activated in our hearts and in our daily lives. It's not enough just to have been baptised.

The Marks of the Christian

The new marks of the believer in Christ are also evident in both readings today. Paul was deciding where to go to preach the Good News, but it says he received insight from the Holy Spirit not to go to one place, but to go to another. Paul was as intense and committed a believer as you can think of. Every day, it was always a temptation to think he knew what to do for Christ.

But God has a plan for the salvation of the world that requires us to listen and follow. Paul submitted to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The mark of the Christian is the one who listens to the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit. This takes a desire to hear God's voice, and practice in discerning how that voice is different from the ways the world thinks will bring success.

The Mark of the World

Finally, we look to Jesus himself for the key mark of the Christian disciple. But first Jesus tells the Apostles that there is a mark that defines those who, he says, "belong to the world." He is not saying that the world God created is bad, but that those in the world who live without God in their hearts will hate Jesus and his followers. It is strong language. They will persecute all who 'bear the name' of Jesus, all who believe in him and follow him.

The Name of Jesus

The Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah was moved to say: When I found your words, O Lord, they became the happiness and the joy of my heart, because I bore your name, O Lord, God of hosts.

The ultimate mark of the Christian is to carry his name at the heart, the very core of our being. Yes, it will be a sign that is contradicted and fought against by the world. The world still is trying to solve a major problem without God. But you and I must bear the mark of the precious name of Jesus in our hearts and minds and actions, even if the rest of the world doesn't get it. He must be the Lord of our hearts, no matter the consequences. His name is Jesus.

Let us not get distracted by the things of the world along the way. Let our hunger to receive him grow with every day we are absent from him so that we will become like the one we worship, who is love.

Now is the time to pray with all of our hearts for a deepening of the conviction that Christ is risen from the grave. The death of sin has been conquered, alleluia. And, that very life giving power is waiting to be given life in us, for us to say yes to the mark of life, to the name of Jesus, alleluia.