

Homily for April 28, 2002
5th Sunday of Easter

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 6:1-7
1 Peter 2:4-9
John 14:1-12

Jesus becomes our way, if we but ask our question.

“Do not let your heart be troubled,”
Jesus tells his disciples in John, chapter 14.

We of the twenty-first century are hearing a story, knowing full well what’s about to happen and how devastating all of it will be. We’re in the upper room on the Thursday before Good Friday. Of course our hearts are troubled. Peter has just sworn undying loyalty to his master and then been informed that, before dawn, he will have denied him three times. We know the horror that is to come. But more than that, we know that the moment of separation is close – the time when Jesus will no longer walk and talk as a friend and teacher and will enter into some other dimension. And during these weeks after Easter, we’ve been coming to terms with this mysterious figure who remains a stranger even to his friends and will soon depart and leave his Spirit. Our hearts are troubled every day, precisely because Jesus seems so often far away. “We do not know where you are going,” says Thomas, “so how can we know the way?”

This offends us Christians all the more because we are led to believe that we live in an information age. We are told that knowledge is power and that we have a right to it. We have more information now than ever before. We can turn on our computers and find the times of the trains at Amsterdam or the cost of a banana in Mexico City. Our Christian experience seems out of step with our everyday volume of knowledge. Not knowing is an increasingly alien experience, and we object. Suffering is bad enough. But not knowing why is worse. Doubt is painful. But God’s apparent silence is agony.

“Lord, let us see the Father and we shall be satisfied,” blurts out Phillip in that upper room. And we know exactly how he feels. Give us the information and we can change the world. Even the couch potato feels better if he knows what the rest of the world is doing.

But Jesus will have none of it. He points his friends away from the simple information they think they need. And toward what? Not to some course of instruction or some other source of knowledge, but neither does he leave us in the dark. He points toward himself. To Phillip he replies, “I have been with you all this time, Phillip, and you still do not know me.” To Thomas, when he asks the way, Jesus answers, “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

When ancient religions talked about “the way,” they usually meant a path of instructions for initiates. To Greeks it meant the mysteries through which the human could become divine. To Jews it was the instruction laid down by the law. But Jesus offers his friends no mysteries and no laws. He offers only himself. He chooses those words that would strike his listeners like the tolling of a great bell through the ages, because they are words that are the name of God himself, given in the Book of Exodus, chapter 3: “I am,” he says. “I am the way.”

What in the world does that mean for our graduates on the threshold of careers or further education? What will that mean for little Anna Grace Scheels and for her parents on the threshold of a new life? For us today, for Jesus to be the way is merely to ask a question of Jesus and then to listen, to be silent,

to be still, to anticipate in that brief moment – in that still point to await our God. For our graduates, I think a question they might well ask could be, “Lord, what was it like for you to finish your apprenticeship as a carpenter? What was it like for you to leave home? What was it like for you to run your own business or to work for another?” Jesus did all that. He left his town of Nazareth when he began his public life and settled in Capernaum. His own family didn’t understand him. “What was it like for you, Lord, to be misunderstood by your family? Lord, what was it like for you to love your family but still know you had to move on? For each graduate here, for each of us, there will be a different answer, a different, a unique incarnation of God in the world through us. Because, as Jesus says in John, chapter 14, in his father’s house there are many dwelling places – there are as many residences, as many ways to follow the Lord as there are people – each unique, each special, each gifted.

And for little Anna, it is no less true for her and for her parents: “Lord, what was it like for you to grow up? What was it like for you to bear the responsibilities for your mother?”

Notice, it is in the asking of the question that we listen – we automatically listen because a question entails the expectation of an answer. A question demands a listening, a momentary silence, a drawing to the edge of expectation and it is there, in that moment, that God can speak to our heart and give us the strength to embrace the future and to allow the future to embrace us with all its terror and possibility.

What a wonderful thing to have with us this morning our graduates from high school who will be moving on. I know they’re not exactly comfortable in public settings and to be made much of – but what an honor and a privilege they show us today. I’ll ask you to stand just for a moment that we might recognize your good work and commend you to God in your future. Some of their number are even in the balcony

members of our bell choir. We salute you and we thank you for the gifts you bring to us and now to the world.

Information does not bring us closer to God. Christ is the way. Ask most people why they have become Christians, or remained in the Church into adulthood, and the answer will almost always be personal. For some it was the school teacher, or the priest, or the parents or the friend who was the sign of Christ. For others it was when they stopped wrestling to understand that they mysteriously encountered the risen Christ.

I can think of yet one other question to invite the Lord to be our way: “Lord, what was it like for you to have a dream and to try and follow that?” Our young parents and their young child, our graduates and their future – dreams made flesh which we celebrate here and at every Eucharist in the confidence given to us by the Christ who is our way.

There is a story from the Jewish tradition about how God becomes our way. It tells of a Jewish peasant who became so absorbed in his field work that he missed the sunset on the eve of Passover. Forbidden to travel after sundown, he spent the night alone by himself in the field. At dawn the next day his Rabbi came walking through the field searching for him. “Your family missed you last night,” said the Rabbi. With a poignant sigh the peasant explained what had happened. “This is indeed unfortunate,” said the Rabbi, “but I hope you at least said some of the appointed prayers.” “That was the worst part of the whole experience,” said the peasant. “I was so upset that, try as I might, I could not recall a single prayer.” “Then how did you pass the holy evening?” said the Rabbi. “I recited my alphabet,” said the peasant, “and I trusted God to form the words.”

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