

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 3rd Sunday of Easter, Saints Philip and James

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Saints Philip and James

April 15, 2018

Some years ago, a recently ordained priest came to see me. The visit took place a few weeks after Easter Sunday. This priest had been on the job almost three years. He was and remains a good and enthusiastic priest but at this juncture in his ministry he was discouraged. "Bishop," he said to me, "on Easter Sunday the church was so crowded that people were standing around the walls. And I knew I had a chance to win back a lot of people who used to be regular parishioners but now don't go to church anymore." He went on to say that he had fasted and prayed for this during Lent and that he really poured his heart into homily.

Leading with my chin, I asked, "And what happened?"

"Well," he said, "the next Sunday was 'Low Sunday' - low attendance Sunday. What does it take to convince people to practice their faith?" he asked.

Just a few days ago, I had a meeting with a group of priests and they were discussing all that they are doing to revitalize the mission of their parishes - and it was all very encouraging. One of them, though, said to me - "It's like pulling teeth. The culture is so difficult!" Another priest responded - "That's true, but it wasn't exactly a picnic for the Apostles to proclaim Jesus in the pagan culture of the Roman Empire."

Well, sometimes we're like that young priest in his momentary discouragement or like the seasoned priest who is deeply aware of the challenges the Church faces. Many of you are young people and all of us, God willing, are young at heart. The Dominican priests here at Philip and James are doing a wonderful job in revitalizing

that his parish and in helping you to become committed and faithful Catholics and true missionary disciples who are intent on sharing the faith with others. Yet, in your interactions with some of your peers— among your friends, classmates, and co-workers - you sometimes experience how challenging it can be to be a person of faith and you also sense how challenging it can be to be the Lord's instrument in helping other to hear the Good News and to respond to it in faith so as to become part of God's Holy People.

We are not the first to experience these challenges. Throughout the Easter Season the Scriptures show us how the Apostles themselves struggled to believe that the Lord was truly raised, how the message eventually took root in their hearts, how they began the mission of spreading the Gospel, and the ways and means by which they did so. Accordingly, as we read the Scriptures, we can describe our challenge to live and spread the faith in three words: message, mission, and means - a word about each.

Let's begin with the message: It's summarized for us by St. John in today's second reading. He tells us that in Jesus we have an advocate who pleads our cause in heaven, "[Jesus who is] is expiation for our sins and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world."

This message is not simply a matter of doctrine. For the Apostles, the message was Jesus himself - as they peered into the empty tomb and as they encountered the Risen Lord in the Upper Room, where, out of fear, they had sequestered themselves. In today's Gospel, the Apostles were half-fearful, half-overjoyed when the Risen Lord came and stood in their midst. He demonstrated for them that he was not a ghost, that he had flesh and bones, and yet he was the glorified Savior, the Victor over sin and death. But it was through such encounters that it began to dawn upon the Apostles that in Jesus we have a love stronger than sin and more powerful than death. In God's eyes we are not the sum our weaknesses and sins but are loved by God so much that he gave us his only Son.

Just as the Apostles struggled to make this message their own and finally, in the power of the Holy Spirit, truly opened their hearts to Jesus, so too in prayer we need to invite the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts, to open them ever more widely to the

message of salvation in Jesus. And we need to encounter Jesus in prayer, in the sacraments, and in other people, so that his heart can speak this message to our hearts – for if we truly believe Jesus rose from the dead and loves more than we imagine, our lives are changed and we will have a peace and a joy no one and nothing can take from us, not even the worst calamity.

And word now about mission and let me begin with this: Once we fall in love, we can't keep quiet about it, can we? Most people when they are engaged, tell their family and friends. When Jesus engages our hearts, our minds, our very being and fills us with his saving love – we shouldn't be quiet about it either! Once the Apostles prayed and received the Spirit, they couldn't stop preaching and teaching about Jesus – they gave their whole lives over to the mission of spreading the Gospel. Gone were their fears, gone was their confusion – they went out and proclaimed the message even at the cost of their lives. And it was not they who spoke but rather it was Jesus speaking through them, as we see in today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Pope Francis, like his predecessors, urges you and me to be missionary disciples, to follow in the footsteps of these Apostles in spreading the faith. Once we have opened our hearts to the Lord and as we grow in our understanding of the faith, let us not keep this message to ourselves but let us spread it. Often we say that we will spread the faith only by our example and we cite a saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi – “Preach always, and when necessary, use words.” Actually St. Francis didn't say those words and they are only partially true. Of course, we need to give good example – never underestimate its power – for one who has hope lives differently and this attracts people to the faith. But we also have to be prepared to give an accounting of our hope – to speak about our Catholic faith with confidence and love, even though we know that some who will write us off because we are believers.

So we have the message and the mission – what about the means? Imagine the Apostles being told by Jesus to spread the Gospel far and wide. They had no money, no education, and they were considered troublemakers. But before he sent them out, Jesus sent them to the Upper Room to pray, to watch and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit gives the Church many gifts for the sake of the Lord's mission but the key to unlocking them all is prayer – prayer in the silence of our rooms, prayer as we read Scripture, prayer as we repent of our sins and prepare to receive the Sacrament of Penance, prayer as we enter upon Holy Mass with all our hearts and souls. When we pray, the Lord shows us the way and gives us the strength and wisdom as well as the gifts that we need to bear witness to him and to our faith.

For in the end, not even the best Easter Sunday sermon will win back the unchurched. It's a good start but there has to follow up and it's our job to be rooted in the message and to go on mission with all the means the Lord has placed at our disposal. May God bless us and keep us always in his love!