

ENGLISH MASS 6TH SUNDAY EASTER 2019C – KRIJTBURG

Bart van Emmerik SJ

The most difficult part of the farewell probably was: emptying her house after the funeral. Dividing her assets with emotional value among the family members. Selling things that may be useful for others. And throwing away a lot of things: the clothes she wore, the papers on which there are still scribbles in her handwriting. All these things go through your hands. It almost hurts you physically to let it go into the garbage. After a while her house is empty, without a soul: She's gone. That is mourning: learning to accept that this is over. But mourning is also: making room for a new connection with the loved one. Her clock is ticking now in your living room, her closet where your clothes are now hanging in, her crockery where your guests now eat from. Not only will her things be given a new place in your life, but also her values and convictions. You realize that her statements are on your own lips more often now. It's as if you're walking around with her in you.

Jesus' disciples had to go through that process of mourning as well. The connection with Jesus they had built up during the three years of journeying with Him was over. Jesus had prepared them for that. During the Last Supper He had made clear to them in different ways that He would leave them to go to the Father. That meant the end of His tangible presence that brought them so much: his voice, his gaze, his words that gave new hope, his body language that radiated so much strength and mildness that you could walk with renewed strength. When he saw their discouragement and shock after he had confronted them with the coming separation Jesus said to them: "I am going away, but I am coming back to you." How, then?

It would not be a simple return after an absence. Jesus explained: "If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word; my Father will love him, and we will stay with him." After the painful end of Jesus' physical presence, another presence arises. A presence that is richer, more powerful, more intimate, than when Jesus was physically among them. What had inspired Jesus, his deep connection with the Father, his words, his values and his actions: it is as if his inspiration has become part of themselves. They walk around with Him in themselves, so to speak. And they realize that they act as He was acting: speaking words that give people hope again, reaching out to those in need.

The intimate bond between Jesus and his Father seems to be present in their own hearts now. It has also made them stronger together and strengthened their mutual bond.

However, they did not get stuck together in a cosy and closed club, but they reached out to share the gospel with others even beyond the frontiers of their own Jewish faith community. St. Paul and his companion Barnabas represented this group of newly converted believers who were not familiar with the Torah, the numerous Jewish rules concerning nourishment: what was permitted to eat and how. This caused tensions in the young Christian community. That is the context of the first reading we heard. The followers of Jesus, who came from Judaism, believed that gentiles should first be circumcised and should observe Jewish law. They wrote letters to the leaders in Jerusalem about what they considered as a distortion in the young community in Antioch. According to them the inheritance that was entrusted to them was not observed properly. As if the co-heirs of your mothers' heritage are using her belongings in such a way that it is giving you unease. The Jewish Christians ask a legitimate question: How do we deal with what we have received? In this case: do pagan Christians have to be circumcised and should they observe Jewish law?

The very first church council is convoked to discuss the issue. They pray together, listening to what the Holy Spirit is revealing to them. In that way they put into practice what Jesus was asking them to do: To get in touch with their interior life, where they can share in the intimacy between Christ and His Father, to listen to the Holy Spirit. That is hard work and not easy. Their conversations are not

smooth and they risk to get stuck in arguments. When tensions are increasing Peter stands up. They all see him as the leader of the church. In a fragment that has been left out in the second reading, we hear Peter say:

"Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

The whole assembly was impressed by Peter's words: the faith and dedication of this new group of believers shows that they are truly inspired by the Spirit of God. Why would we block that work of the Holy Spirit by burdening those coming from outside Judaism with rules which we, Jews, aren't obeying. In this way they came to a conclusion that offered a way out of their dilemma and arguments.

This honest conversation among them was an application of Jesus' command to open themselves to his new presence in their community and to listen to the Holy Spirit talking to them through Peter. In that way the Holy Spirit brought them back to Jesus in his inspiration and connection with God. In their spiritual conversation the Spirit revealed to them how to deal with a specific problem in their community.

This also creates a promise for us today. Dealing with our smaller and bigger issues and struggles, we can go into prayer and into a honest conversation with each other. Asking ourselves: "What would Jesus do in this case?" With that question we allow Christ to speak to our hearts and to share his inspiration with us. Not as a burden but as a flowing river that brings life.