

Recognizing Jesus
Homily of May 4, 2003
by Fr. Brian Timoney

I heard a story that is really too good to keep to myself. A pastor went to visit one of the religion classes and he asked the children, "What is Easter about?" All hands went up. So he said, "Yes?" One child said, "Well, Easter is a time when we gather around a tree and give each other presents." ... That didn't go too well. Then the next child said, "Easter is a time when we the whole family gathers together and we have turkey." Now, the teacher's face is falling... Then, finally there is a little girl, waving her hand, and the pastor says, "Yes, Mary..." She said, "Well, Jesus gathered his friends for a supper. And, then, when the supper was over, he went out to a garden and there the police arrested him. Then they crucified him and he died. And they put him in a big hole in the rock, and they covered it over with a big stone." The teacher's face is beaming..... "And Easter means that every year they come and they roll the stone back and he comes out and, if he sees his shadow, it means that there are five more weeks of basketball."

Well, we are not always so clear about the meaning of Easter. Sometimes, it is a big puzzle for us. For example, the Scriptures make it very, very clear that the appearance of Jesus after the Resurrection was such that he was not instantly recognizable. Ever think of that? Mary Magdalene, for example, thought that he was the gardener. The men on the road to Emmaus went along all day, chatting with him, then invited him to dinner because they thought he was a stranger. And now, in today's gospel, we hear that the disciples thought he was a ghost.

So, I think the question for us is do we recognize Jesus. And if so, how? Clearly, you have faith in him. Otherwise you wouldn't be here this morning. But, how do you see him? What kind of person is Jesus for you? Is your recognition of him, perhaps, confined to Sunday Mass, and that, perhaps, distracted by the thought that you have arranged to go to breakfast with some friends? And what about the rest of the week? Do we recognize Christ then? Do we even say "Hi" to him in a daily prayer? We are so distracted, so busy. So much goes on in our lives that, sometimes, it is a real struggle to aver to the fact that Jesus is here in our lives.

How are we to recognize the Risen Lord? The Scriptures certainly suggest two ways. The disciples recognized him when he broke bread with them, when he had a meal with them. And they recognized him when he explained the Scriptures to them. We, too, can experience Jesus in listening to Sacred Scripture and in sharing the Eucharistic Bread.

Listening to Scripture, to the word of God: The Vatican Council said, "Christ is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in

Church.” Let me repeat that. “Christ is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in Church.” Yes, we rightly speak of the Real Presence of Christ under the form of bread and wine, but often forget his Real Presence in his word in Sacred Scripture. Let me paint you a scenario. Let us say that some Sunday morning, for whatever reason, either the car didn’t start or the alarm clock didn’t go off, or whatever reason, you are not in church and settled in your pew before the First Reading. Would you feel, in any way, disappointed? Would you feel that you missed something very important? Would you feel that you just missed Jesus personally speaking to you? Or would you fail completely to recognize Jesus in his word? He is saying to us, “I am not a ghost. I have been here with you for the last fifteen minutes in my word.

We all believe that he is really present in the Eucharist under the form of bread and wine. But, again, a question..... Do we actually grasp the reality of that presence? How does it affect our faithfulness, our commitment? Are we eager to come to church to receive him, body and blood, really present, to have him touch our lives in the deepest possible way, and most of all, do we carry his presence with us out into the wider world? Does it affect how we live for the rest of the week? Does it affect our relationship with family and friends, with neighbors, with co-workers, with strangers?

Remember that Scripture gives us a third way of recognizing the Risen Lord. Jesus himself said, “Whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me.” He is really present in every human being. Do we grasp that? Does it really affect our relationships with others?

I recently came across a poem that I would like to quote. The author is unknown. But this poem was written about a big industrial city, Birmingham in England.

When Jesus came to Golgatha
They hanged him on a tree.
They drove great nails through hands and feet
And made their Calvary.

They crowned him with a crown of thorns.
Red were his wounds and deep.
For these were crude and cruel days,
And human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to Birmingham
They simply passed him by.
They never hurt a hair of him.
They only let him die.

For people had grown more tender.
They would not cause him pain.
They only passed him down the street
And left him in the rain.

Still, Jesus cried,
“Forgive them for they know not what they do.”
And still it rained a winter rain
And drenched him through and through.

Crowds went home, left the streets
Without a soul to see.
And Jesus crouched against a wall
And cried for Calvary.

Could this have been written about Pleasant Hill or Walnut Creek or Martinez or Concord? I hope not. I hope that we will recognize Jesus in the many disguises that hide his face: Sacred Scripture, Eucharist, and one another. Amen.