

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter + 21 April 2024 + Acts 4:8-12 + I Jn 3:1-2 + Jn 10:11-18

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today is one of my favorites from St. John. Listen again to ch. 3 of his 1<sup>st</sup> letter: *Beloved: See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are.* That is an amazing statement, that should fill our hearts with joy and hope. So let's look at while this is so.

To begin, this passage might not pack the punch that it should today because many people think that everyone is already a child of God. But is that really true? Well, as is so often the case, the answer is yes and no. We can say yes, every human being is a child of God insofar as this is understood to mean that we are created by God, made in His *image and likeness*, and invited into relationship with Him—into a life of grace. And so there should be a real solidarity among all people. But we know, practically speaking, this is not how people act in this world. Which is proof of why, in a Biblical sense, we have to admit that not everyone is yet a child of God.

So how does one become a child of God? Well, first of all, it is a pure gift, solely because God loves us. Again, St. John says, *See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God.* And what is love? A little later, St. John will write: *in this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him (4:9).* In other words, the love of God for mankind is proved by the fact that the Father sent the Son to lay down His life for us on the Cross, so that we could pass from being slaves to sin and death, to free children of God, and heirs to eternal life.

And we know that the Cross was the greatest act of love because it was willingly chosen. Which is why Jesus says in our Gospel today, *I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own.* *On my own:* He freely chose it. And He received nothing from His death: making it the purest act of love possible.

Ok, so we can say that the Father desires everyone to be His children, simply because He loves us. Jesus is proof of this desire, because He is this desire put into action. But the next question is: how? How does this movement from slave to son happen? Well, the answer is by faith and Baptism, whereby we receive the Holy Spirit. St. Paul writes this in his Letter to the Romans: *We were buried therefore with [Christ] by baptism into death ... we know that our old self was crucified with [Christ] in order that ...we would no longer be enslaved to sin (cf. 6:4-6).* He continues a little later: *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (8:14-16).* So the Holy Spirit of God makes us children of God, and the Spirit is evidence that we are children of God and so can call upon God as our Father.

And that brings us to our next point: such an incredible gift demands an equal response. St. John writes a little later in his letter: *By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.... By this we know love, that [Christ] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth (3:10, 16-18).*

And so we see that we have been given an incredible gift: adoption as sons and daughters of God, meaning that we now have the Spirit of God—the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead—meaning that we are heirs to eternal life. But if this Spirit is to remain alive in our hearts, we must love like Jesus loves: not just in word, *but in deed and in truth*. And that is not easy. It means seeking, by God's grace, to continually put to death the “old self;” that is, sin, in our lives. It means living no longer for ourselves but for Christ, and for all those for whom Christ died—for all people. And it means being generous with all of our gifts, that God has given us. And never forgetting that they are indeed gifts, not rights.

All that being said, I want to return to our 2<sup>nd</sup> reading. St. John writes, *Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is*. If you recall, last weekend we talked about the resurrection of the body on the Last Day, and what our resurrected bodies will be like, and how much of this remains unknown to us at this moment. John is here making that same point: *what we shall be* in the resurrection is still a mystery. But what we do know now is that *we shall be like him*—our glorified bodies will be like Christ's, *for we shall see him as he is*.

Just think of that! We shall see God! Traditionally, heaven has been called the “beatific vision”; meaning, the very vision of God, for all eternity. Again, that vision is beyond the realm of our imagination. But we should keep our eyes fixed on that vision, even now. For keeping that vision, that hope of heaven before us, is the only way we can continue to live as sons and daughters of God, and not fall back into the slavery of sin and fear and death.

Finally, as we heard about Christ the Good Shepherd in our Gospel today, the Church throughout the world celebrates the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. I wrote in the bulletin last week about vocations, and our need to continually ask the Lord of the Harvest to send out laborers for His harvest in our prayers. St. John's words we heard earlier apply here too: let us support vocations not just *in word or talk but in deed and in truth*.

Obviously prayer is first. But also, by living in such a way that our young people pick up from the earliest years, that there is nothing more important in life than seeking God, seeking His will for our lives, and serving Him all our days as joyful sons and daughters.