

Mass of the Anointing at Lourdes
Memorial of St. Joseph the Worker
5/1/15

In the first reading today (Acts 13:26-33), Paul told the Jewish members of a synagogue that the risen Jesus appeared to those who had journeyed with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. He spoke of the witnesses in the third person because he was not among those who made that journey. His own testimony would rely in part on those who had made the fateful trek to the Holy City with the Lord. When Paul first met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus he did not recognize him. "Who are you?", he said as he laid blinded on the road. The Lord would respond, "I am the one whom you are persecuting." Jesus clearly identified the disciples as his companions. Paul would come to identify the Lord in the same way. Earlier on, he had watched approvingly as the mob stoned the Deacon Stephen to death. That image must have haunted him but then later helped him recognize the crucified Christ.

We do not know if the risen Jesus ever appeared to Pilate, the chief priests, the Sanhedrin, or his Roman torturers. They never gave any testimony to this. Either Jesus did not make such appearances or having done so they failed to recognize him since they were not among those who would have been familiar with the Lord as the ones who had journeyed with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

These thoughts are just curious speculation but what we do know from the gospel accounts and the testimonies heard from the Acts of the Apostles, those who recognized the risen Jesus were familiar with him during his earthly ministry. They had made the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem in the company of the Christ. They became

acquainted with his manners, his message, and his mercy. As time went on, the habits of the Lord's heart became their own. As they work with Jesus, prayed with Jesus, were served by Jesus, as well as served with him, they began to work like Jesus, pray like Jesus, and serve others in the same manner Jesus had served them. The mutual companionship was an essential dimension of post-resurrection testimonies and, as Paul made clear to us, these witnesses conveyed more than information or knowledge of Jesus. They shared with others their companionship with the Lord.

Paul became familiar with Jesus because the disciples of Jesus shared with him their companionship with Christ. That journey from Galilee did not end. It continued and still abides in the Church as the pilgrim people walking in the way of Jesus.

Paul would later proclaim himself an Apostle, a witness, because he knew the Lord through what he suffered for his ministry. What he endured for the sake of the gospel made him familiar with the one who had endured the cross for him. Those who would then come to know Paul met the Lord Jesus through him. Those who were companions of Paul became familiar with the crucified Christ and came to be his followers on the journey to the new and eternal Jerusalem.

This is what makes more curious the question of Thomas in the gospel today (Jn. 14:1-6), "Lord, we do it know where you are going. How can we know the Way?" Jesus, surely with a smile, responded to his doubtful companion, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In knowing Jesus Thomas already knew the way.

The Lord has come to walk with us. He reveals himself to us. In knowing him we find all that for which we

could hope or desire. All our hungers are satisfied. All our wounds are healed. Like Thomas, we may still be asking Jesus the way without knowing that his companionship, his nearness to us, has already brought the kingdom close. The way becomes personal. Mercy has a face. As we become more familiar with Christ Jesus, we come to know our way, our truth, and our life.

For this reason, our companionship with one another in this pilgrimage is not just a convenient practicality. Like Paul we come to know the Lord in the familiarity of our fellowship, a fellowship whose company is no meager number. This journey began in Galilee, we now benefit from a large company of witnesses, from the protector and provider of the Holy Family, St. Joseph, to the humble and docile witness of Bernardette.

Today is the feast of St. Joseph, the Worker. It is also the beginning of the beautiful month of May when all the Church honors Mary, the mother of our Savior and mother of the Church. She stood by her Son's cross and still stands by us. She understands our pains and offers us the hope of her Son.

With this great company, we also lean and learn from one another. The Good Shepherd has given us as companions for one another. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." In this fellowship of faith our suffering and frailty becomes a sacramental encounter where the Lord makes himself even more familiar to us. The sacramental anointing to be conferred is such an encounter where the Lord brings his mercy to you, the *malades* (the title given to the infirmed and frail who come to Lourdes), and through you to the whole Church. Your weakness is an occasion for an epiphany of the Lord's grace.

This buoys us with hope even in our sorrows or the awkward, helpless feelings that can grip us. "Have faith in me," the divine stranger among us may be telling us now. "Do not be afraid." As I already know you, you will come to know me. In this journey I am your friend and companion. What seems cloudy now, you will come to see face to face.

In the simple gesture of anointing the oil is one element, the other is the meeting of the minister with the *malade*. This ritual is performed as part of a human encounter with the divine. Both the minister and the *malade* are being touched by Christ. In each is found the witness of the Church. For each the Lord becomes more familiar and mercy more near and dear.

In a little while now we will hear the words that will bring us still closer to that yearned-for encounter. The hope is here. Now is the taste of the kingdom to come as we approach the altar of His sacrifice and ours commingled knowing how blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.