

# Sunday Homily

## 3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER

1 MAY 2022

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

“Do you love me?”

### Illustration

When William was diagnosed as having terminal cancer, his whole family went into shock. They found it difficult to face up to, let alone talk about. Even when William left hospital to go home to die, Annie, his wife, carried on as if nothing had changed. She still fussed about the cleaning, the cooking, the shopping, all the little details that go to make up life, but which you might expect to put on hold as you spent the last few days with your loved one.

The truth was, that was the only way that Annie – and her family – could cope with the situation. They were so shocked at the diagnosis that they simply couldn't accept it, and it was only after William's funeral that the reality began to hit home. Only gradually were they able to begin to accept that it had really happened, and that William had really died, so that the process of grieving and of inner healing could begin.

### Gospel Teaching

Perhaps the disciples in today's Gospel were in a similar situation. They were in a state of shock after Jesus' death. And even though the risen Jesus had already shown himself to them, they were unable to take in these strange events. So they carried on with their lives as if nothing had happened. Like Annie with her cooking and cleaning, the apostles turned to what was familiar: they went fishing. They were in denial, avoiding facing up to what had happened; and, symbolically, they came back empty-handed – they had caught nothing. Avoidance and denial are not productive strategies for dealing with life's crises.

Then Jesus enters the scene. Significantly, the night is over and the dawn has broken. Light is always symbolic in John's Gospel, and although at first the disciples don't recognise him, the presence of Jesus signals the end of the darkness and the dawn of a new day for them. He helps them find what they have been looking for – not simply fish, but a way of moving forward out of their state of shock and grief, a way of moving from denial to acceptance, from disbelief to faith, from death to perceiving the truth of the resurrection. The penny drops – “It is the Lord” – and, typically, it is the impetuous Peter who plunges straight in to reach Jesus.

The scene that follows illustrates how Jesus helps Peter to move forward. He gently leads Peter to face up to his past. Perhaps the easiest thing would have been for Jesus to have glossed over Peter's threefold denial. But Jesus knows that if Peter is to move on, he needs to confront his past and grow from it. So, gathered around a charcoal fire, reminiscent of the charcoal fire by which Peter had stood the night he denied Christ, Jesus gently begins the healing process. He knows that Peter's denials have been eating away inside him, and so he gives Peter a chance to be redeemed, to make good the past. By his questioning, Jesus is actually helping Peter overcome the wound that he had inflicted on himself, pouring in his forgiveness and healing. This time Peter is able to make more than a merely impetuous profession of love: he makes a deep commitment. This is what Christ elicits from Peter – for Peter's sake – so that Peter will be able to face his future without running away again, without denying the Lord he loves.

### Application

In our own lives, we meet situations that cause us shock, which we find hard to accept or deal with. There are things in the past of each one of us that are painful and in need of healing or forgiveness. If we try to avoid them and just focus on the superficialities of our daily lives, these wounds will eat away inside us. They will keep us in the tomb of denial, anger, despair, darkness. We will remain dead inside.

But if, like the beloved disciple, we can recognise the presence of the Lord, he will help us face our problems and heal our wounds, as he helped Peter. We find in Christ not condemnation and recrimination, but forgiveness and acceptance of who we are. He is the light that can dispel our inner darkness, the hope that drives away despair. And if, like Peter, we can commit ourselves in love to Christ, he will invite us to follow him and to exercise a loving, pastoral responsibility towards others: "Feed my sheep." This will undoubtedly lead us to the cross – but the future need hold no terror for us, for the cross always leads us to the light of the resurrection.

# Sunday Homily

## 4th SUNDAY OF EASTER

8 MAY 2022

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

“But the disciples were filled with joy  
and the Holy Spirit.”

### Illustration

Richard Attenborough is someone who has done many different things, and achieved much in his long life. In his younger years he was an actor in the theatre and in film. Later on he became a film director and has produced some outstanding work. But, as he said himself, he never wanted to be a film director, he just wanted to direct one film. That film was *Gandhi*.

In 1962 he was handed a biography of the great Indian leader and, once he had read it, he knew he had to make the film. It took him another twenty years before he achieved his goal, but the result was well worth the wait.

The film tells the story of a man of peace who spent his life fighting against the injustice and violent tendencies of the world. In one scene, we see the Mahatma very weak from fasting in an attempt to curb the violence in his own land. From his sickbed he says, “All the lessons of history tell us that violence never succeeds. For a time it appears to win, but in the end it always fails. Always.”

### Gospel Teaching

Like Gandhi, the early Christian Church found itself faced with the constant threat of violence. At first its opponents offered argument, and verbal abuse, then it developed into threats and assaults, and eventually Christians found themselves facing arrest, imprisonment and even death. The apostle Paul experienced all these things, in an ascending order of hostility throughout the course of his missionary life. His visit to Antioch in Pisidia with Barnabas is welcomed by the local people, but resented by the Jewish community, his own people. Paul and Barnabas are expelled from the city.

The Christian community in Rome suffered terrible treatment at the hands of the emperor, Nero. They were made scapegoats for the fire that destroyed a great part of the city. They were most cruelly dealt with to distract the population from uncomfortable rumours about the emperor himself. The shock of this violence prompted John the apostle to write about them and to reassure the followers of Jesus that all would be well.

The people who went “through the great persecution”, as John describes it in today’s second reading, were the Christians of Rome, who suffered at the hands of Nero in AD 64. John tells us that God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. He wants us to persevere in our faith and in our love and not to yield to the temptation to turn to violence ourselves.

Our great example in all this is Jesus: the one who describes himself as a shepherd, who cares for his sheep, even to the point of laying down his life for them. In conversation with the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus speaks of his true followers as those who listen to his voice. That voice speaks of peace; it also speaks of justice and truth. It is a voice that will not be silenced. Violence cannot stop the force of truth.

## Application

Today’s generation, like every generation that has gone before, is plagued by violence. People suffer greatly through the anger, hostility and downright viciousness that occur every day around the globe. The evil that people do lives after them, spawning more evil in its turn, creating cycles of violence.

Looking at history, as Gandhi did, do we learn the lesson it teaches? Looking to Jesus, do we hear his voice? As the followers of Christ, are we true members of his flock, living peaceful lives? John, in his vision, sees a huge number of people, made up from every nation, race, tribe and language. They are people who have suffered, but who have come through suffering and are now victorious. That victory is not only over the violence of others, but also over the temptation to violence that we find in ourselves. This is the greater victory, the victory over ourselves.

Gandhi was inspired in his life by the teaching of Jesus in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” In his turn, Gandhi inspired Martin Luther King, who led the great movement in America in the 1960s for justice and equality. Both these men, Gandhi and King, met with violent deaths. But they were not defeated. Their message, their voice, their example lives on.

In the face of evil, Jesus does not ask us to do nothing. He asks us to do everything that will lead people into the ways of peace.

# Sunday Homily

## 5th SUNDAY OF EASTER

15 MAY 2022

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“Love one another; just as I have loved you,  
you also must love one another.”

### Illustration

In the summer months the seaside town becomes very busy. Its well-planned streets, with their brightly coloured shops and houses, are thronged with tourists and holidaymakers. The tree-lined street is filled with cars, and traffic brings noise and bustle to everyday life. On the high street itself stands the Catholic church, a tall grey building. Stepping in off the busy street, and through the porch, one enters a totally different world.

The interior of the building is an enclosed sacred space. The high walls and ceiling encircle a huge space, but not an empty space. This interior is full of silence, peace, light and shadow, colour and stillness. In this spot a person can sit and be still and let all the cares of life fall away.

In a side chapel beside the sanctuary, candles flicker and a few souls can be seen kneeling in prayer. On the altar the Blessed Sacrament is exposed. Yet that real presence of God is felt in every part of this church, it is so well designed. The words of the apostle John, in his vision of heaven, come flooding into the mind: “Here God lives among men.”

The people of the town are rightly proud of their church. It is a holy place. Apart from Mass and other ceremonies, people call in to pray at all times of the day. The very air of the building is fragrant with prayer. “They shall be his people, and he will be their God.”

Whatever credit must go to the architect – and he deserves much – perhaps the people must be given more. For it is prayerful contact with the living God that truly creates the atmosphere of a holy place.

### Gospel Teaching

When Paul and Barnabas were making their missionary journeys through Asia, their first priority was to create communities of faith, places where God would dwell among his people. They had much success in their work and were able to appoint elders to oversee the communities when they moved on. Whenever they returned to visit these communities, it was like finding a home from home. They were greeted warmly and welcomed into the house of God.

When the missionary journey was completed, Paul and Barnabas arrived back safely in Antioch. They had come full circle, and now back in this community they were able to recount the story of their travels, and of the joys and difficulties they had experienced. In return, the community gave them welcome, recognition and rest.

These experiences of community all flow from the room of the Lord's Last Supper. There, as he broke bread with his disciples, Jesus gave them the great commandment, the new commandment: not just to love one another, but rather to love as Jesus had loved. This is a transforming love. It changes the one who loves and it changes the one who receives that love.

This powerful commandment Jesus gave to his friends at the very time that he was being betrayed. Judas had just gone out into the night to give his friend away. At that moment, back in the upper room, Jesus was telling his disciples that this moment of betrayal was also the moment when his glory as the Son of God was being revealed. To persevere in love when you are surrounded by chaos and cruelty, surely this is something glorious, something divine.

## Application

All these experiences – of churches, of communities, of the Eucharist, of the Gospel – these belong to us as Christian people. We have tasted something of the divine, something of John's vision of heaven, in the course of our life. But for many people these things are unknown. They have never felt the nearness of God. But they do know about tears, and death, and mourning and sadness. This is the world they live in. A walk into a peaceful church may soothe but will not solve their problems. What will?

In talking with his disciples, Jesus says very clearly, "By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples." Our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to persevere in love, even in the face of hostility and hardships. As Paul and Barnabas remind us, "We all have to experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God."

By this love let us help to wipe away the tears from people's eyes. When they feel that they are loved, then they will know that the world is new.

# Sunday Homily

## 6th SUNDAY OF EASTER

22 MAY 2022

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK II

“Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you.”

### Illustration

Anyone who has worked with people will know that success comes down to listening to each other. Those charged with helping others in a professional way would tell us that ninety per cent of their time is taken up in listening to what is said and, more importantly, in noting the underlying fears and anxieties. This is a special gift, as we humans tend to make things more complicated than they need to be.

An interesting way to test people’s listening skills is to ask them to pass on one or two lines of information by simply whispering it to the person next to them. If this is done in a group, then, as the message is passed from person to person, people will mishear the message or add their own twist to the story, so that the final version may bear little resemblance to the original news.

### Gospel Teaching

The writer of the Apocalypse tries to convey his vision of the heavenly city, the kingdom of light where all will be perfect and united around the Almighty. The Church on earth witnesses to this kingdom and in some ways is a forerunner of it, but that doesn’t mean that we remain free from turmoil.

The history of the early Church is one of division. Sometimes traditions would collide, yet often communities stood firm, connected to Christ the cornerstone. The dispute at Antioch is a good example of the kind of struggle that occurs in every age. The visitors had come to command and condemn, not to listen; they wanted to impose the demands of race and culture on this fledgling Christian community. The question of circumcision disguised a bigger debate: whether it was the law that saved, or being baptised into Christ. It was also about who held the power in the Church, which was quickly becoming predominantly Gentile.

The disquiet of the locals is matched by the unspoken fears of these self-appointed teachers. Yet let’s not be too quick to judge them. Acting out of arrogance and self-importance, it can be easy to justify certain positions, forgetting that it is the Spirit that gives us the gift of faith. In this particular debate it is the same Spirit that brings the peace of Christ to the community.

So what is this peace that is promised by Christ? It is a peace the world cannot give, because it is intimately connected with the kingdom. Jesus tells his followers of the Pentecost experience. He must return to the Father, so that the Advocate can be sent to be with them. The Spirit will be a helper and defender who will teach and hold them together through times of trial. They will be strengthened by the Spirit dwelling within them in Christ's name. The promise made to the covenant people is fulfilled. The peace of Christ is nothing less than a sharing in life eternal. It is something his followers can have now, if they are willing to keep his word and listen to the Advocate. That Spirit continues to dwell within our communities, casting out fear and binding us together.

## Application

Peace is more than the absence of conflict and war. Christ asks us not to be afraid, reassuring us that he has left us a companion for the journey. Yet the Spirit of Pentecost usually indicates a time of testing to come. The Spirit is sent among us to quell our fears in the midst of the world. The presence of the Spirit certainly does not preclude debate within the Church – in fact this is the way the Church has developed through the years. It is possible to disagree and still love each other enough to try to listen and understand. It also helps to find time for prayer, that we might give ear to the Spirit within.

The disputes of the early Christians may seem a bit obscure and irrelevant to us. But one thing is clear, in their time and in ours: it is hard to be open to people and resist the temptation to place our burdens on them. It's more convenient to tell others we have everything worked out and that their role is simply to follow our way of doing things. Yet all the while Jesus makes it so simple: "If anyone loves me he will keep my word." Others might be able to cast a new light on that word for us. God's Spirit can work in amazing and unexpected ways, in us and in others – are our minds and hearts truly open to believe that?



# Sunday Homily

## 7th SUNDAY OF EASTER

29 MAY 2022

YEAR C

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

“May they all be one.”

### Illustration

At the time of the Irish rebellion – Easter 1916 – people in Ireland were thrown into the turmoil of division. The War of Independence was to follow, and after that the tragedy of civil war. Two young men, Michael Collins and Harry Boland, fought side by side in the War of Independence. They were great friends, and were rivals in love for the same girl. When a political compromise secured a form of independence, these loyal friends found themselves on opposite sides as the bloodshed of civil war began. Their friendship was not broken, nor their faith in each other, but their politics drove them apart.

In the struggles that followed, Harry Boland was shot and killed by soldiers working for Collins. “The Big Fellow”, as Collins was called, mourned deeply the loss of his friend. All too soon, Collins himself would be caught in the crossfire, and he too was killed. Since then, books and films have been made telling the story of this period, the tragedy of war, the waste of life and the heartbreaking tales of friendships destroyed. People who want the same thing go about getting it in different and conflicting ways, and find themselves destroying one another in the process.

As this particular story approaches its centenary in the coming years, its lessons are there for all to see. How easily we fall into hostilities with one another; how, without our wanting it, we can become enemies of those we love; how our good intentions and fervent desires can blind us to that greater good that we should love one another above all things.

### Gospel Teaching

In the early days of the Church, two young men appear in the story as conflict and hostilities break out. Both are religious young men. Both are eager for the cause of God and the salvation of people. Both have been brought up to be fervent followers of their Jewish faith. In other circumstances they might even have become firm friends, but the events that brought them together were troublesome and violent.

The first young man is Stephen, who has become a Christian and is a superb preacher of the “new way”. His success as a preacher brings him into conflict

with the presiding authorities and with their version of religious truth. If Stephen will not desist from his preaching, the authorities will have to take steps. When Stephen becomes “intolerable” to his foes, he is taken out and killed. That is when we meet the second young man. His name is Saul.

Saul is an equally fervent young man. Concerned for the purity of the faith, he stands by as a witness to the execution of Stephen. He even approves of it. Soon his world will change and he will become a Christian, like Stephen. He will preach the same Gospel message, and one day he, too, will meet his death because he preached Jesus Christ.

Saul, who became Paul, never forgot his previous career as a persecutor of the Church. He confessed it many times. That day in Jerusalem, when Stephen prayed for his persecutors and “fell asleep in the Lord”, must have remained with Paul his whole life long. He learned so many lessons from that experience. How foolish and stubborn religious people can be; how easily we can destroy the very good that we are trying to do; how vital it is that, in trying to change the world, we begin by changing ourselves.

## Application

At the Last Supper, the great prayer that Jesus prays is for unity among his followers. It is an intensely strong bond of unity that Jesus prays for. With God in Jesus, and Jesus in us, the consequence is that God will be in us. Such a bond will resist all attempts to break it. In fact, if we are “completely” united, the world will wake up and realise the reality of God. When words fail, and gestures are refused, only the force of love can affect people for the better.

So many people see religion as the cause of all the trouble in the world, not as its cure. Arguments leave them unimpressed. Eloquence is lost on them. Actions can be misinterpreted. But love cannot. If our lives express the love of God for others, this can only do good. “Love is the one thing that cannot hurt your neighbour,” St Paul said.

Like those young men, Stephen and Saul, another fervent young man, Gandhi, learned the lesson of life: “We must *be* the change that we want to see in the world.”