

Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 15, 2011

The heart of my homily is the last sentence in today's Gospel: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." I focus on life because no other word is more expressive of Easter. And I focus on life because the Gospel of John has been called the Gospel of life. Not only is life a favorite word in John. The author makes clear that this is why he wrote the Gospel: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." That you may have life.

What does being alive say to you? This is important. It says something. It is a powerful everyday symbol. It says different things to different people at different times. When have *you* felt gloriously alive? When you felt the first stirrings of another life within you? When you smiled for the first time on your newborn child? (When you look at these young fellows on their First Communion day)? When someone's eyes meet yours in love? When life springs from your pen or your brush? When your healing hands touch life to weary flesh? My 93-year old mother hates to miss anything of life. What makes *you* feel alive?

Which brings me to another question. What does it mean to be alive in Christ? All the above, but above anything else the eye can see, the ear hear, our minds imagine. When John speaks of "eternal life," he does not mean simply life in a heaven to come. He means, eternal life now. John's First Letter opens: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, - the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was made manifest to us." Jesus is our life.

John tells us we receive that life only by believing in Jesus. Eternal life is given when Jesus breathes forth God's Holy Spirit upon the disciples. Through the ages the Spirit is given through the living waters of baptism that make us new. And this eternal life is nourished by the body and blood of Jesus we experience each Sunday in the Eucharist (and these three boys experience for the first time today).

When Jesus took our humanity, he made it possible for us to share his divinity. Eternal life is not poetic fancy. “Eternal life,” Jesus said the night before he was to die, consists in this, “that they know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.” This life is so real that the New Testament resorts to striking symbols, strong metaphors, to suggest how close it is. Jesus is the vine, you are the branches that live from that vine. You are a dwelling place, and Father and Son make their home within you. You are a temple, and God’s Spirit dwells in you.

So strong, so enduring, so eternal is this life that even death cannot destroy it. “Whoever feeds on this bread,” Jesus declared, “will live forever.” Yes, we will die the death of the body. But despite that terrible wrenching of soul from body, despite that fearful movement into apparent darkness, you whose life in Christ is nourished by his sacramental body and blood will continue to live that life beyond the grave. You will never not be branches on the vine that is Christ, temples of the Spirit, dwelling places of God One and Three.

But the most difficult question remains: How alive are you? We all know people who, while not dead, are only half alive. What agonizes me most is the large number of Christians who have God’s life in them but are barely alive. Yet they grapple daily with deep problems affecting their own well-being – their relationships, their security, their own happiness and prosperity. The Christ within them does not thrill them. But why? Why? We are Christophers, Christ-bearers. Deep within us runs the life of God. We are risen people with Christ. We can feed on the flesh of Christ, get intoxicated on his blood. We are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.”

Life in Christ is Christ in us – Christ growing in us until we become fully human, fully alive. This is Easter life. Is it your life? Not abstractly, but feeling it in your bones? As Mary thrilled to the life of Christ within her? It is not enough to *have* life, even God’s life. We must *live* life, feel life, open up to life, let life sway us and have its way with us. This is Easter life. Alleluia? Alleluia!

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