

Mass with Indigenous Peoples
Wednesday of the Sixth Week of Easter

[Acts 17: 15, 22-18:1; Psalm 148; John 16:12-15]

“If I hear one more person say something to me about COVID-19, I’m going to scream!” How often have we heard that, or said it ourselves? Since the beginning of the year, and over the last two months in particular, all we hear about in the news is this new strain of coronavirus. We hear the words so often, they come at us so incessantly like a tsunami that won’t stop, that it can drive us crazy. We can feel the need to walk away or change the channel or listen instead to music – anything other than COVID-19. The words are just too hard to bear sometimes.

Think about that, if you would, and hear again what Jesus says in the scriptural passage we just heard from the Gospel of John: “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” Here Jesus recognizes that the words he speaks are difficult to bear. He is acknowledging this not only for those first disciples but also to anyone who hears his message. The words are tough to take. Now, we know it is not because we have been hearing them hour after hour, day after day, for months on end. So, there have to be some other reasons why the words of Jesus can be really difficult to hear and bear. It seems strange even to be saying this, because we know Jesus speaks only out of love for us. He is our good and loving God, after all. How can it be that his words would be hard to bear, that we would not want to listen to them? When we think about what happened to St. Paul, as recorded in the first reading, we can begin to appreciate what Jesus means here.

St. Paul is on his missionary journey to preach the Gospel, and he comes to Athens. He goes to the Areopagus, a place citizens gathered for the sharing of ideas. The people who have gathered around him listen attentively, politely and openly, until Paul speaks of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. At this point the words are rejected. Some people scoff openly, while others more politely say, “We will hear you again about this,” which is another way of saying, “Don’t call us; we’ll call you.” Only a very few respond positively to the message and go with Paul. The majority find the words of Paul, the words of the Gospel, very hard to bear. They can’t stand them and turn their attention away, looking to hear something else. When we look closely at this reaction, we see why we, too, can find the words of the Gospel hard to bear.

First of all, it is not simply a matter of being unable to understand how someone could rise from the dead. What is really at stake are the implications of this if it were true. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the definitive affirmation by God the Father that all that Jesus had taught is true. It confirms the divinity of Jesus and the power of his mercy over all that is evil. If this is true, then the only reasonable response is faith and repentance; the only rational option is to change one’s life completely to conform to his teaching and follow him as a disciple. The announcement of the resurrection of Jesus is a summons to a radically changed life, and it is precisely this renunciation of sinful ways, and acceptance of the words of Christ as our only compass, that can make his words very hard to bear, almost impossible to take.

And that’s not all. Paul had accepted the truth of Christ and is now announcing him to others. The response he received was rejection by the people of Athens and persecution elsewhere. When Jesus admits that his words are hard to bear, he is implicitly acknowledging that rejection

and persecution will accompany those who do accept them. Fast forward to today, to our world in which we have many competing words coming at us through TV, Internet, radio, social media and so on, words that promise an easy life, that seem very enticing. In this context we can be mightily tempted to turn away from the strong words of Jesus, with all that they imply, to listen instead to messages that are more to our liking, and will bring us worldly acceptance if we follow them.

But what we cannot forget is this: the resurrection of Jesus did happen; his words are true, and they lead to everlasting life! No one else speaks such words; no one else can lead us to eternal life. So, we know we must listen to, hold on to and follow the teachings of Jesus, but how are we to do this if they are so hard to bear, if we find them really hard to take and would rather listen to easier messages?

Well, let's go back to the same Gospel passage and consider something else Jesus said. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." This is one of many promises Jesus makes to his disciples to send the Holy Spirit. This Spirit of truth is bestowed in order to lead us deeply into the meaning of Jesus's words and give us all that we need not only to hear them but also to follow them, regardless of the consequences. This, too, we see in the example of St. Paul and the other Apostles. Their missionary journeys began after they received the Holy Spirit. Before that, they were men filled with fear and lacking in understanding. In the Spirit, they could, indeed, bear the words of Jesus, they were happy to hear those words over and over again without tiring, and were empowered to go out into the world, boldly, with an energy that did not abate even in the face of persecution, to share those same words with others.

We need the words of Jesus. Our world needs the words of Jesus. At this mass, let us pray for a new outpouring of the Spirit of truth into our hearts and upon the Church, so that we will welcome the Lord's words joyfully, bear them gladly, and share them boldly with others.

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Sacred Heart Church of the First Peoples (livestreamed)
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