

Homily April 22nd

My nephew hosted the Easter Sunday dinner for some of the family. His daughter, my grandniece, is at the age for confirmation and so I inquired of her as to how the confirmation program was going. She sheepishly responded: "It isn't." This brought the simple encouragement that she should not delay confirmation or she might never get around to it - throwing in the practical piece about how she may want to be a baptismal sponsor someday.

At the end of dinner, my sister, who is her god-mother, was a bit more challenging. And my grandniece made some reference to un answered questions about the faith. (Although I am not sure that she ever asked the questions.)

Since then I have been mentally composing a letter to assist her in further reflection in which I would remind her that the response to unanswered questions is to continue to pursue answers. Indeed, to seek the truth is a most fundamental human obligation, given our intellect and free will. Seeking the truth in science and math has lead to extra-ordinary human advancement. The pursuit of truth in the less empirical social sciences, such as psychology or psychiatry has led to understanding of human behavior and therapies to re-direct behavior for the good. The pursuit of the truth in religious matters, matters of God and human purpose, adds an element of faith. Faith applies to what cannot be demonstrated as empirically as other things, and yet, once we say "I believe" - the objects of our faith must be treated with the same certainty as what can be proved. For instance, when we say we believe in the existence of a personal, loving, creator God then we must treat that as true in the same sense in which we know the more evident existence of ourselves.

I would tell her something I told her father some 25 years ago and that is her moral obligation to pursue the truth about the faith she was raised in, an obligation to those who have provided her with life and care and an introduction to that faith.

Finally, I would tell her that at the heart of the truth that we subscribe to is the person of Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, God in human flesh, the second person of the Holy Trinity. He is the one who came that we might have life and have it to the fullest.

Essential and fruitful belief in Jesus Christ as our savior is the message of our scriptures this weekend. St. Peter proclaims this truth most succinctly in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. He had been challenged by the authorities because of a healing that occurred when the apostles invoked the name of Jesus. He reminded the authorities that

Jesus was the stone rejected who had become the corner stone. And then he said: "There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved."

In the Gospel today we were reminded of one of the occasions when Jesus spoke of the redemption He was going to accomplish when He spoke of He, as a Good Shepherd, would lay down His life for the sheep. Using the image of shepherd, and, all the more, identifying Himself as the Good Shepherd, Jesus illustrated the depth and color to His redeeming work. It was more than a single event paying a price to ransom us from punishment for sin. He was about an ongoing relationship of care and protection in this life to guide, to shepherd, His flock into the next life. Jesus as shepherd described His relationship with us as one of mutual knowledge. He knows His sheep and they are to know Him. The ongoing relationship of knowledge of Jesus and accepting His shepherding is captured in our second reading when John reminded us that God's love has made us His children. And at the same time he reminded us that we are destined for something else, something greater. That is to be accomplished when we do let Jesus shepherd us into eternal life.

The Good Shepherd who redeemed us and remains present to guide us each day is the truth I want my grand-niece to seek and find. There are two tracks to this search. One is learning about Jesus. It includes knowing the scriptures and knowing about them. It means learning the who and how and when of their writing, and how to best understand them. It includes knowledge of how the Church describes Jesus and His work. That presumes familiarity with the catechism of the Catholic Church. It requires a consistent effort to refine one's knowledge of Jesus. The other track is the simple matter of personal relationship with the divine person whom we do not see and hear in the same way that we see and hear one another. This is the track that requires a consistent time and effort to simply sit or kneel, to relax, and suspend or disregard so much of the more apparent reality around us to open our hearts and minds, our spirits, to encounter the divine person, the one united in the one God as the all-powerful creator, the compassionate self-sacrificing redeemer, the indwelling Holy Spirit and the gentle and caring Shepherd who cares about every moment of our lives, moments of hope and joy and moments of challenge or of danger. These are all moments that He wants us to know Him as much He knows us.