

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
April 18, 2021 Streaming Mass
Easter 3rd Sunday of Year B Acts 3:13-15, 17-19; Luke 13: 35-48

If you are in the habit of watching the evening news on TV, you know that in the last minute or two there is usually some kind of human interest story, one that tries to tug at the viewer's heart strings. For the past several years it has most often been a scene of a soldier returning from a long tour of duty in Iraq or Afghanistan, suddenly appearing in front of his or her surprised wife, husband or children. Of course, it is a picture of complete joy and happiness. More recently, the scene has been one of newly vaccinated grandparents, released from quarantine, appearing before their surprised grandchildren, who overcome with joy, rush into the arms of Nana and Pop-pop.

We might have expected the disciples of Jesus, likewise, to be overjoyed upon suddenly seeing Him before them. Instead, their reaction is quite the opposite. Startled and terrified, they think they are seeing a ghost. Of course, when ghosts do appear, that usually is not a good sign of what is to follow. In the folklore of people of all different tribes and races, ghosts come back for one reason, viz., to take care of "unfinished business." In the minds of Jesus' disciples, there was no doubt a lot of "unfinished business," in regard to having to explain to Jesus their desertion of Him in His final hours. But instead of any words of recrimination or disapproval from Jesus, they hear only "Peace be with you." These are words of forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus has returned to them, not to take revenge, but to start all over in teaching them what they were not able to understand before.

After they have calmed down, Jesus says, "These are the words I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the law of Moses and the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opens their minds to understand the Scriptures. Jesus connects the dots for his disciples in a pattern they had never seen before, so that they can re-read the Scriptures they had grown up with, with a new understanding, from a different perspective. What is that new perspective? It is something, He says, that they have seen with their own eyes—His crucifixion and resurrection. That is the lens, the prism, for making sense of what we call the Old Testament. Then they will understand how He, the Christ, had to suffer and rise from the dead, so that forgiveness of sins would be available for the whole world, beginning with the Jews in Jerusalem.

We have to go back to today's first reading to the words of Peter in that sermon

he preaches in Jerusalem. He explains to the assembled crowd that the God of their ancestors has glorified His "servant" Jesus when they rejected and handed over to Pontius Pilate. They preferred that a murderer, Barabbas, be released to them, rather than He who is the Author, the Source, of life. They, and we, have to know how they, how we, killed Jesus before forgiveness is possible. But none of us was there on Calvary when Jesus was crucified. How then did we participate? We take part in the crucifixion of Jesus any and every time that we bolster our sense of well-being in finding a way of throwing someone out of our circle of those whom we find acceptable. And we all do this. It is part of who we are; it is part of our human nature that stands in need of redemption, of forgiveness. It is built into our culture in the form of racism, nativism, classism, homophobia and trans-phobia, bullying and all the plain meanness we use to prove how we are better than the next person. Any time we spend our energy comparing ourselves with others, either positively or negatively, rather than delighting in the fact that we are all God's "beloved" sons and daughters, we are attacking Christ, Who wants us to love, to accept ourselves, because we are loved unconditionally by the One Whom He calls "Father." On the cross Jesus is the quintessential Other, the "stone rejected" that has become the "cornerstone." Because we too have rejected others, we are in need of forgiveness. The Jews, the Romans were merely the stand-ins for all humanity.

The cross helps us understand all human history because it shows us who we are, and what we do. Jesus opens up the Old Testament (His Bible) from a new perspective to show the necessity of His crucifixion and death. The Old Testament is a sort of conversation, a dialogue, of two voices, although it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart. One is a voice of savage violence that seems to celebrate war, rivalry, envy, jealousy and hatred. This is what the crucifixion reveals. The dark passages of the Old Testament give us a picture of ourselves. Even when the Old Testament says God told the Israelites to do some awful things, that's not God speaking. It is human beings using God to serve their own violent and sinful purposes. We distort God and make God in our image, and the Bible records this. That is why even the violent parts of the Bible have to be kept. They reveal us to ourselves, and point to the truth that Jesus revealed, when He allowed Himself to be crucified. The other voice is God speaking through the prophets, moving a barbaric people beyond their cruel ways to a more expansive view of humanity. That voice is best articulated in Jesus' words of forgiveness, of love, of a victory over death. Both voices speak the truth—one the truth about ourselves, and the other the truth about God. Both are part of the Bible and both are necessary, but they are different. One finds its fullest expression in the crucifixion and the other in the resurrection. That is why the cross and resurrection together are the interpretive lens for understanding the Old Testament. It is why a verse can't be read in isolation, out of context—it may not be God Who is speaking

there, but only sinful humanity.

In every Eucharist, when we gather for “the breaking of bread,” we proclaim Jesus’ death and resurrection. We remember who we are and what we do, what we have done. We recognize that we have sinned and are in need of forgiveness. We give thanks because we are assured forgiveness is always available to us. Because we have been forgiven, we are ready to forgive others. That is what Good Friday and Easter are all about. That's what we are called to be all about, as well.