

Good morning. It's a pleasure to be here with you, to open up a really beautiful scripture. I'm talking about our First Reading, the one from the Acts of the Apostles. Next to the gospels, Acts is absolutely my favorite book in the whole Bible. It tells the story of the earliest history of the Church, and it's full of the enthusiasm of the early Christians and their bold proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Risen One. We see a frightened, uncomprehending band of followers turn into courageous evangelizers as the Holy Spirit moves within them.

In fact, today's passage takes place immediately after the Holy Spirit comes upon them in that upper room. The apostles are led out into the streets of Jerusalem, where Peter boldly confronts the crowds: "You who are Israelites, hear these words! Jesus of Nazareth was a man commended to you by with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know! ***This man you killed, using lawless men to crucify him.*** But God raised him up, for it was impossible for him to be held down by the power of death."

And that passage, Peter's courageous address to the crowds about Jesus, concludes with the beginning of today's reading: "Let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made both Lord and Christ, ***this Jesus whom you crucified!***" And by the end of the reading today we see that the power of the Spirit within Peter and the others moves 3000 people to be baptized that very day. Three thousand! What an amazing turnaround we see here! What a testimony to their new-found enthusiasm, that power of the Spirit within them! I wish we all had that enthusiasm and willingness to proclaim our faith to the world! This parish, this whole Church in Western Washington would be very different.

But I would like to point out for you something in this passage that is easy to pass over, when we focus on that wonderful enthusiasm. Notice that Peter first accused the crowd of crucifying Jesus. And ... many in the crowd apparently accepted the charge, asking them, "What then are we to do, brothers?" And Peter gave them the answer, "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will then receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

Now, I think it is unlikely that Caiaphus was in the crowd that Peter addressed that day. It is unlikely that Annas, or the other chief priests of the people were part of the crowd. And THOSE leaders were the ones responsible for handing Jesus over to the Romans. THEY arrested Jesus, THEY tried him, THEY handed him over and asked for his crucifixion. And yet, 3000 of those in the crowd accepted responsibility for the accusation Peter made against them ... and repented ... and went on to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. What is this?

You see, the Jewish people at the time of Jesus, and actually even for centuries before his time, had an understanding of themselves as a people of God. God's covenant was with the people, as a whole, not with the leaders. And along with this came a clear understanding that the people as a whole could bear a collective guilt for the sins of the nation, even though it might be the evil and corruption of their leaders that led to the nation's sins. The people knew the meaning of social sin, and it was reinforced repeatedly through the prophets and the scriptures; and the whole people were accountable for social sin. In fact, even if you fought against that sin and corruption, you shared in it – even the prophets knew themselves to be a part of it. If we understand this, it is no surprise to see it reflected in our reading today. Thus the people of Jerusalem repented, and came forward for the baptism that Peter offered to them in the name of Jesus Christ, for release from their sin -- and that simultaneously opened their hearts for the forgiveness of all their private sins as well. I'm not making this up.

Now...let's take that concept...and fast-forward 2000 years. And let's ask the question, "Where is Jesus Christ being crucified today, in our world, in May of 2011?"

Do you NOT think that Jesus is being crucified again today? Don't we all know in our hearts that he is? Jesus identified with the poor, the lame, the outcast, the prisoner, the alien. When they suffered, he suffered. And when he died, an innocent victim, for our sins, he died also in solidarity with those innocents who suffer in every time and every place.

In our own land, in this year, we are on the verge of witnessing a great public crucifixion. I wish such a thing were new; it is not. Innocent victims of war, especially children, have always suffered the most in any war, and largely in silence. Innocent unborn children have been sacrificed on the altar of private choice in our country for over a generation now. You can find the homeless every day on the streets of Seattle, not just veterans and alcoholics, but women, teenage children, some who have to sell themselves to survive. But now, in our land, we are part of a historic public debate that is really about the kind of people we will be. Will we balance our budgets by turning our backs on the poor? Are our own private tax breaks more important than feeding the hungry and caring for our elderly? Do we want a society where those who have the most wealth and power will continue to amass more wealth and power, while those who have little find that the little they have is taken from them? Is having a military force whose annual cost is almost as much as the cost for all the other armies and navies and planes and bombs and soldiers and guns in all the rest of the world – is buying THAT FORCE more important than caring for our neighbor?

We are on the verge of a great public crucifixion. That is my word, crucifixion, but our bishops are saying the same thing. They aren't so blunt, and I'm sorry if these words sting, but we're not just witnesses to this crucifixion, ***we're parties to it!*** And what we desperately need right now is a Peter, no longer timid but alive in the experience of the Risen Lord and bold with the new power of the Holy Spirit, a Peter who will say to us, "People of America! You are putting to death the Holy One, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!" For whatever you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, that you do unto me.

But a Peter not all we need. We need as a people to be able to hear those words being addressed to us. The people of Israel could understand social sin and collective guilt. And because they could, they could repent, and it brought them salvation from all their sins.

They could have said, "We aren't the ones who put Jesus to death. It was the Romans. It was our leaders. It was the mob. I didn't do it, so go preach to somebody else." And so it is with us. We can say it's someone else's sin. "It's the Republicans, it's the Democrats; it was the previous Administration. It's someone else's problem, my taxes are high enough already, I have enough troubles paying my own bills." And you know, ***it is no coincidence that when we deny complicity in social sin, our conscience becomes a wishy-washy rubber stamp for all sin, including our private ones, which we soon fail to recognize any more.***

Maybe we don't want Peter's charge to apply to us. "Whoa! Gee, Denny, that's one heck of a downer message!" Well happily, there's another choice offered in our story today. You see, we can go back and JOIN Peter and the other disciples. We can look deeply within ourselves and rediscover the power of the Risen Jesus Christ in our lives, a power that can enable us to live without fear, of death or anything else, just like they did. We can draw on the power of the Holy Spirit, bestowed upon us in Confirmation, and publicly proclaim our faith, boldly in word and deed, just like they did. And if all of us here did that... as I said earlier, this parish, this whole Church in Western Washington would become transformed! And maybe, just maybe, it would change the terms of our state and national conversations, so that we might really become the great people we want to believe we are.

Deacon Denny Duffell, May 15, 2011