

## The Third Sunday of Easter

*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. (1 John 3:1)*

When Bishop Michael Curry was elected Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, he referred to us as members of the Jesus Movement. In the Rite of Confirmation in the Book of Common Prayer, a member of the Jesus movement is someone who renounces evil, is committed to Jesus Christ, and follows Jesus as our Saviour and Lord. It seems straightforward enough to renounce evil and acknowledge our sinful nature and commit ourselves to avoid sin and to do something about it whenever we encounter it. The same may be said about our commitment to Jesus, to accept who the person Jesus was and is for us today, and try to commit ourselves to his ways, no matter how hard that might be. The challenge comes, I think, in understanding what the phrase about Jesus in the Rite of Confirmation - *follow him as my Saviour and Lord* - means. Here, I think, we are moving into the murky waters of theology.

Such questions should not embarrass us, for they are the web and weave that form our belief in the twin natures of Jesus - the human and the divine - passed on to us from the deepest traditions of the Church. The gospels are graphic testimony that the first followers of Jesus struggled with his identity and what it meant to them. There is more than a hint that Jesus did the same. After the crucifixion and resurrection these questions became more important as the early followers of Jesus struggled to make sense of the Easter event and make it coherent in a multi-religious culture, where all manner of opinions on God, the sacred, and the divine held sway. We witness this struggle in the writings of the Apostle Paul, and in that section of the Christian Scriptures we call the Pastoral Epistles, letters written to an emerging church struggling to understand what it means to be a member of the Jesus Movement.

The First Letter of John, which has been the Sunday Epistle since Easter, was addressed to a community of faith struggling with such questions. One of the first major heresies of the emerging church originated with a religious group who were known as Gnostics. Gnosticism, from the word Gnosis, meaning knowledge, was a complex religious belief system which came in many forms. In its Christian form Gnosticism manifested itself in the belief that Jesus was not human, but wholly divine. The logic was that if Jesus is the Son of God, and God is divine, then Jesus must also be divine, for no human can do the things Jesus did and does. By the power of the Resurrection, Gnostic believers in Jesus considered they themselves were in some way elevated into a divine reality. In simple terms, Gnostics believed that through the Resurrection of Jesus they were made perfect, and by being made perfect in no need of further moral effort. In other words, as members of the Jesus Movement, Gnostic Christians considered themselves beyond sin and morally above the rest of humanity.

The more humble Christians of the Jesus Movement, for whom sins of omission and commission are an ever present reality in our lives, considered themselves still a work in



progress. Through the humanity of Jesus, believers are granted a glimpse of the Imago Dei, the image of God in which we are made; and through the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus the hope of new beginnings, through the certainty of the love of God for all of creation, is made known. It was this belief in the power of the Resurrection of Jesus in the flesh that allowed the writer of 1 John to declare to the faithful: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.*

After the shock of the crucifixion and the bewilderment of the Resurrection, the disciples and early followers of Jesus went to the only source they knew - the Hebrew Scriptures - so seek some kind of understanding about Jesus, and what it all meant to them now he was no longer with them. Our lesson for this Sunday from the Gospel of Luke provides a counterpoint to the resurrection appearance of Jesus we heard last Sunday in the Gospel of John. In the Gospel of John, Jesus invites the disciples to believe in the resurrection by touching his wounds. In Luke's telling of the same event, Jesus invites the disciples to believe by offering him something to eat. The underlying theme in both gospels is that the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus is the fulfilment of the divine will as foretold in Scripture through Moses, the prophets, and the psalms.

To say it another way, over the years, you have heard me say that we cannot understand the nativity of Jesus at Christmas unless we see it through the shadow of the Cross. If you will, Christmas is the "how" Jesus came. We cannot understand the Easter story unless we do so through the whole of Scripture. Easter is the Christian Exodus, the "why" Jesus came. Through the power of the Resurrection of Jesus, God liberates us from the sins that bind in the same manner God through Moses liberated the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. This does not place us above sin, as the Gnostics believed, and to be honest some Christians of today believe, for sin is part of our human nature. Rather, as Fr. Zosima, in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov* exhorts, that what seems to be evil in us is purified by the mysterious power of the Lord, who has guided us with love. Easter, the Resurrection of Jesus is the promise of new life for each and everyone of us lost in the sinfulness of our human nature.

When I prepare people for confirmation, I tell them that Confirmation is not an end in itself, but rather a new beginning, a coming to that place where we are ready to live into the vows made for us at our baptism, to become true members of the Jesus Movement. Confirmation is not something that is done to us, but something we live into for the rest of our lives - the realisation that no matter what our condition, to be declared a child of God and believe it, is the greatest gift we can ever receive and an occasion for thankfulness: to *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.* Amen