

"Now I Have Nothing and Am Joyful"

April 10, 2016

Third Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 5.27-32, 40b-41;
Revelation 5.11-14; John 21.1-19**By Kathryn Jean Lopez**

Do you love me? The question Jesus asks Peter today in the gospel can be a daily examination of conscience for each of us.

Jesus Christ asks, and more than once: *Do you love me?*

If Jesus asked you this today, how would you answer? Would you answer as Peter did: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And more than once? Would it be true?

How do we love him? Do we check boxes? Or do we love radically, as he prescribes in the gospel? As God himself gives himself to us?

Going to Sunday Mass is important. But do we go out of obligation or habit, or do we go because we love and *need* him? Because we need to *worship* him? Because we need to *receive* him? Do we give thanks to him in all circumstances we find ourselves? Is there anything more important than him in our lives? Could we lose everything and be grateful for him?

Christian Witness Today

At the beginning of today's gospel, we read from the top: "Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias." In our world today, our Lord is revealing himself in the witness of Christians whose faith is being challenged in the most fundamental ways. In life-and-death ways. Pope Francis has said that there are more martyrs today than in the early days of the Church. Their witness should stop us in our tracks and deepen our examen.

A recent exhibit in New York City, presented by Communion and Liberation at their annual NY Encounter, highlighted two Christian women from Iraq. Both wives and mothers, they fled their homes because of ISIS, which has targeted Christians for extermination. One of the women, during the course of her video testimony, expresses her gratitude to God that terrorists intent on genocide challenged her lukewarm faith. She went from being a fake Christian to being a real Christian, as Pope Francis, again, might put it. (If you're a follower of his weekday homilies, it sounds quite familiar to you.)

Earlier this year, I interviewed the exiled Chaldean archbishop of Mosul, Amal Nona. He's been reassigned to Australia now because his diocese no longer exists. I pressed him for a while, asking: As the shepherd, didn't he have some difficult conversations with people who, maybe wanting to protect their families and homes, considered renouncing their Christian faith – or at least keeping it hidden? *Who cares what ISIS thinks, as long as God knows what's in my heart?* I imagined Westerners in similar situations might be asking exactly this sort of question.

With the joy of a father who has seen the apple of his eye soar, Archbishop Nona assured me he had no such conversations. His people chose the cross. They may be living in auditoriums and storage containers on church property in Jordan. They also happen to be radical examples of what it means to live the gospel. They know they have been asked by Jesus: *Do you love me?*

Archbishop Nona tells me that his people had no doubt who they are: God's people. And faithfully, they followed Christ. Their identity, he told me, is their life in Christ. He says that even before ISIS emerged as a threat, being Christian in Mosul was sometimes considered a death-defying act – and his best friend from seminary was murdered by al Qaeda. But genocide now has meant a whole new test of faith.

An Awakening

And so you hear them proclaim, as one of the women in the New York exhibit does: “My strength is in Jesus Christ.” She is grateful for what ISIS has unintentionally done for her. “Honestly, this was an awakening for me, because I was completely absorbed in my work, my kids, their homework, the things I have to do. I was completely distracted.” Her faith, she confesses, was cold. “Before I had everything but I was unsatisfied, now I have nothing and I am joyful.”

Don't you hear today's responsorial psalm in the background as you hear her testimony? *I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.*

When she feels sad, she says, “thinking about what we used to have,” she focuses instead on Jesus. “I have Jesus and he is enough,” she says, testifying to how she has seen him provide for her family in ways she and her husband no longer can. “I have faith and completely entrust my life to him.” Do we do the same, in our relative freedom and luxury?

“I am sure he will lead me where I need to go,” the woman proclaims, adding: “Wherever that is. Whether it is to go abroad, to stay here, or to go back to our homeland.”

And, of course, she prays for the conversion of those who drove her and her family from their home.

Jesus is asking her, *Do you love me?* And she is answering with the witness of her *fiat* in adversity, in big ways and small. And see how she feeds his sheep? Her testimony feeds us, draws us deeper into drinking from his sacramental waters.

They are human. They cry. They are scared. But they are also full of joy. They take seriously the words that Peter and the apostles declare in the first reading today: “We must obey God rather than men.” If you ever feel somewhat removed from the lives of the saints, consider these, our contemporaries – weep for them, as Pope Francis often puts it, in prayer and sacrifice, as brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

From her temporary home of a storage unit in Jordan, one of the Iraqi Christian women explains: This life is different, but it is okay for me. She explains how “it made us stronger as a family; we're more united as a family. We are more attached.” She explains that a big house can be “colder” when it comes to family life. “But here, no.” Her son sleeps right beside her. “I talk to him and read with him,” she explains. Her daughter “can hold my hand” during the night because the space is so limited. “Can you feel what I am saying to you?” she asks. A mother and child at the heart of the Passion, in the throes of love, being conformed and configured to Jesus Christ, as he lives, dies, and rises.

Judgment and Mercy

The first time I heard her, all I wanted to do was go to Confession. Are we as immersed in Jesus' merciful love as this woman who declares: “If I am Christian, truly Christian, I need to forgive everyone. I need to. I need to forgive. No, I am not angry [at ISIS]. I know they have a weakness that made them be that way. I have no hatred or resentment towards any human being. . . . A Christian is called to be that way, so that he can transmit God's message, and Christ's message is Love. We love our enemies, even the ones that hurt us.”

A lot of the anger and confusion and loneliness of our day stems from the fact that we misunderstand our identity – we go looking for meaning in things other than Jesus, despite professing to be Christian. We don't always forgive. We don't always love as we ought. We don't always live the gospel.

Archbishop Nona tells me that there is no life without Christ. What good is a home and homeland if you've given up the promise of eternity with God?

Even with the challenges to religious liberty we continue to experience here in the United States, most of us haven't had the question posed to us as dramatically as some Christians in Iraq and Syria and others persecuted throughout the world have. Which makes it, in many ways, all the more crucial that we answer Jesus with great love in each and every instance. If we love him, if we drink at his waters, do we share what he's given us? Do we overflow with his love? Do we take seriously his missionary mandate? Do we start by feeding others with the great graces of our own encounter with him, in prayer and sacrament?

During this holy year of mercy, we are mindful that "feeding my sheep" has so many implications. There are those who have fallen away. There are those who despair. There are those who can't see the unending love God has for them. There are people who thirst – who need water to drink before they receive the water of the Word of the Lord. And when we give them the former, they will see the latter.

And look, too, at the people in the gospel today – the apostles. Think of their successors today. Do we pray for them? Do we pray for the pope and the bishops? Do we pray for our priests?

Archbishop Nona tells me that all of our problems lie in forgetting to live like Jesus. Have you forgotten to live like Jesus? Is he your reality? Give him your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Give him everything. Every day. Hear his question: *Do you love me?* And respond in love, and love alone. We might just find ourselves growing in it.

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FOR FURTHER READING

Catholic News Agency, "Persecuted Christians – Latest News," available at:
<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/tags/persecuted-christians/>

Joint Declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill, available at:
<http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/02/12>

Kathryn Jean Lopez, "Joy amid Terror," available at:
<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/431696>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Who Are Christians in the Middle East?" available at:
<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/global-issues>

IN SHORT . . .

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- ***Pope Francis has said that there are more martyrs today than in the early days of the Church. Their witness should stop us in our tracks.***
- ***One woman expresses her gratitude to God that terrorists intent on genocide challenged her lukewarm faith, for she went from being a fake Christian to a real Christian.***
- ***"I have no hatred or resentment towards any human being. . . . A Christian is called to be that way, so that he can transmit God's message. . . . We love our enemies."***