

6 Easter A – Fr. Val Handwerker

May 21, 2017

Cathedral

5:00 and Noon. 7:30 a.m. Mass at St. Louis Church

“Grant, almighty God, that with heartfelt devotion we may celebrate these days of joy, which we keep in honor of the risen Lord...” So we asked in our opening prayer that I sung at the beginning of Mass. To celebrate these Easter days of joy assumes that we have joy. What exactly is supposed to give us joy in this Easter season?

The historical novel Cold Sassy Tree (p. 47), by Olive Ann Burns, is set in the South, specifically in a small town of Georgia. There is a conversation between a boy named Will Tweedy and his grandfather. Together they’re on their stomach, finishing the preparations for the grave of his grandmother, and the boy Will says with a Georgia twang:

“How you go’n stand it, Grandpa? I mean goin’ home every night and she ain’t there.”

“Thet’s what I don’t know son. Thet’s what I don’t know. Yore granny was...” he choked up again.

When he could go on, he stretched both arms down into the grave, dropped them helpless like, and said: “But do I got a choice Will Tweedy? I got to stand it ain’t I? Livin’ is like pourin’ water out of a tumbler into a dang Coca-Cola bottle. If’n you skeered you cain’t do it, you cain’t. If’n you say to yoreself, ‘By dang, I can do it!’ then, by dang, you won’t slosh a drop.”

We heard Jesus at the Last Supper in today’s Gospel. The disciples are “skeered.” The Lord Jesus has told them—we heard it last Sunday—that he’s returning to the heavenly Father. **“In a little while the world will no longer see me,”** we hear Jesus bluntly tell them—and us—this Sunday, and they are confused, anxious. Like Will’s Grandpa grieving the absence of his wife, the disciples don’t know how they will be able to keep on going, without Jesus right there with them every step of the way.

Then Jesus gives us this lovely promise: **“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of Truth.”**

For twenty centuries, that Holy Spirit keeps telling us: “By dang, you can do it!”

“Another Advocate”: A good teacher, Jesus paints the picture of the Spirit right alongside of us. Back then, the word he used, “Advocate,” or “Paraclete,” was also used for a defense attorney in a courtroom, standing right next to a frightened client, pitted against powerful adversaries. In living out our faith, that “other Advocate” keeps reassuring us, “By dang, you can do it!”—even in the midst of our worries and fears, ever pitted against the spirit of evil.

It’s that Holy Spirit that, for twenty centuries, has been alongside of us, and in the midst of trials, in the midst of meeting evil head-on in our lives, that Spirit prods us, empowers us, giving us joy: “By dang, you can do it!”

The next scene in Cold Sassy Tree, both the boy Will and his grandfather keep looking at his grandmother’s grave. “Finally Grandpa sighed again and said, ‘I wouldn’t ast the Lord to steady my hand for a thang like pourin’ water into a Coca-Cola bottle. But I’ll be astin’ Him for hep on this.’”

Oh, yes, Friends: We need to keep “astin’ for hep.” The Risen Jesus has ascended to his Father’s right hand in heaven. He has passed on the baton to us, and in *his* name we’re called to show his presence in the world.

Elsewhere in St. John’s Gospel, in speaking about himself, Jesus says, **“The one whom God sent...does not ration his gift of the Spirit”** (3:34). As generous as the Risen Jesus was with those first disciples after his Easter victory, he is just as lavish with us this Easter season. And in the beginnings of the church, he left no detailed blueprint, and the disciples trusted the Spirit’s guidance as they made hard decisions. In our time, we face major choices for the future. Pope Francis has raised issues for study which, ten years ago, we couldn’t even bring up in church: the question of women ordained as deacons; the issue of married priests; and the pastoral response of the church after a marriage breaks down, and there is a remarriage. We can be confident in that the Risen Jesus “does not ration his gift of the Spirit.” Indeed, Jesus has not left us orphaned, alone. And we are called to show his presence in our world precisely by the example of our daily lives. His Holy Spirit, the other “Advocate” stays right alongside of us, “By dang, you can do it!”...His Spirit keeps telling us. “By dang, you can do it!”

Let’s do it, then.