

Homily
3LentA
March 23/24, 2019
St. Bernard Church
Deacon Tim Sullivan

STRIKE THE ROCK

I don't usually have a title to my homilies, but I do for this one. The title is "Strike the Rock." I will try to describe how the phrase "Strike the Rock" explains in a very basic way what it means to belong to the Catholic Church.

In our First Reading, as the Jews are complaining about the lack of water during their exodus from Egypt, Moses cries out to the Lord, "What shall I do with this people?"

God answers Moses by telling him, "Strike the rock, and the water will flow from it for the people to drink."

Now God could have sent water to the Israelites any number of ways without using Moses. He could have made it rain, for example. But He didn't. He delegated His authority and His power to Moses by directing him to strike the rock. Moses was obedient, he struck the rock, and God supplied the water the Israelites so desperately needed.

So there are two points to the story.

The first point is that God and Moses had a conversation. The Bible doesn't tell us how Moses heard God's voice. But Moses was listening for God's voice. He asked God a question and expected an answer.

The second point is that God answered Moses' question. And He did so in a specific manner. He delegated His power and authority to Moses and told him exactly what to do.

This whole story is a foreshadowing of the mission of the Catholic Church and of all who belong to the Catholic Church.

After Jesus died, rose from the dead and then ascended into heaven, God had a problem. The problem was, "How am I going to give all those who lived after the time Jesus was on earth the benefit of Jesus' teachings and His power, the power Jesus used for healings and exorcisms when He walked the earth?"

The answer is in the story of Moses striking the rock.

God delegates to the Church and to each member of the Church the authority and power to represent Jesus and to act in His place, just as He gave Moses the power and authority to act for Himself.

How does this work?

The answer is in our Second Reading from the Letter to the Romans and in today's Gospel from John.

In the Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul says that through our faith in Jesus Christ, we have access to the grace in which we stand.

He goes on to say that this access to grace is received when the love of God is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Jesus adds to our understanding of all this in his encounter with the woman at the well. The woman, like the Israelites in the First Reading, has a thirst issue. She has to keep coming to the well to draw water.

Jesus says to her, "If you knew the gift of God, he would have given you living water, the water that gives you access to eternal life."

Jesus goes on to explain that this living water is the Holy Spirit. "The hour is coming," He says, "when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth."

What Jesus says becomes a reality when, after Jesus ascends into heaven, He sends the Holy Spirit to His followers, the earliest Catholic community. It is clear from the Acts of the Apostles in the Bible that, at Pentecost, the Church and its members are filled with the Holy Spirit. It is clear that the followers of Jesus are listening for specific directions from the Holy Spirit, are following those directions and they receive the authority and power to act on behalf of the Holy Spirit.

What happened after Pentecost happens now at every Mass, when the priest asks the Holy Spirit to come upon the gifts that are placed on the altar and make them into the Body and Blood of Jesus. The gifts represent our lives, so each one of us present at Mass receives direction, authority and power from the Holy Spirit. Every one of us.

Let me give you an example of how this works.

Some years ago, a friend of mine, Rick, attended a Lenten retreat here at St. Bernard's. The priest leading the retreat was a Redemptorist.

At the end of one of the retreat sessions, the priest had an altar call. He invited those who were present to come forward and make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Rick went down and accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. Something powerful happened to Rick when he did this. He was dramatically changed. He was filled with a new, lively faith in Jesus and with an awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Rick was a real estate appraiser. Sometime after this experience at St. Bernard's, a woman, someone Rick knew from his previous employment, called Rick and asked him to do an appraisal. She was getting a divorce, and she and her soon to be ex-husband needed to know the value of their house. She had moved out, and the house was at that time occupied by the husband.

When Rick went to the house to do the appraisal, the husband told Rick how miserable he had been in his marriage and how much he was looking forward to the divorce. Rick had a copy of a book on marriage enrichment called "The Five Love Languages" in the back of his car, and he recommended the book to the husband. The husband quickly declined, emphasizing that he had no interest whatsoever in reconciling with his wife.

As Rick drove away, he sensed the Holy Spirit directing him to return to the house and give the husband the book on love languages. So he turned around, drove back to the house, took the book to the front door and rang the doorbell. When the husband answered, Rick said, "God told me to give you this book." The man asked, "Have you read it?" Rick said, "No, but you're supposed to read it." He gave the man the book and left.

Two months later, Rick got a phone call from this same man. The man told Rick that he had read this book, that it had awakened him to how selfish he had been as a husband, that he had reconciled with his wife and that the book had saved their marriage. A few weeks later, Rick received in the mail an invitation to a ceremony this couple was having to renew their wedding vows.

This is how it worked for Moses, for the early Christian community and for Rick. Fr. David Fleming, an expert on spiritual discernment, says this:

"God is an active God. He is always at work in people's lives, inviting, directing, guiding, proposing, suggesting."

God does this through His Holy Spirit.

It might be helpful during this Lent to reflect on two issues:

1. Do I believe the Holy Spirit is constantly communicating His will to me? Am I listening? Paying attention?
2. Am I willing to be obedient to whatever the Holy Spirit directs me to do? Do I trust Him?

SO STRIKE THE ROCK, AND LET THE WATER FLOW.