

6th SUNDAY OF EASTER – A (May 29, 2011)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

As we draw near the end of this Easter season and to Pentecost, our readings today prepare us even more explicitly for that great feast of the Holy Spirit. In the first reading, for example, we heard how Peter and John went down to Samaria after Philip's successful work in bringing them to a knowledge and love of the risen Christ. Peter and John then prayed for and laid hands on the Samaritans so they would receive the Holy Spirit. This is but one of many examples of the fulfillment of Jesus' promise in the gospel that his followers would receive the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth who would remain with them and be with them.

That promised and realized gift of the Holy Spirit, in turn, is at the heart of our second reading from the first letter of St. Peter where challenges us to "always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope." That's quite an assignment, isn't it? In fact, that challenge faces us on at least two different levels: 1) we need to determine and clarify just what it is we hope for and what we hope in; and 2) once we determine the focus of our hope, we need to be able to explain to others why we have that hope, why it makes sense to do so.

A couple of recent events provide us an opportunity to reflect on these questions. One of these involved what happened, or better yet what did not happen last Saturday, May 21. I'm sure that you read or heard all about a Harold Camping, a preacher who announced to the world via his radio network that the world would come to an end and that the second coming of Christ would take place on May 21. I don't know how many times over the past few weeks I saw that message on that big electronic billboard down by Crossroads. I got a few questions about what I thought of those predictions; part of my response was: "Well, if it really happens as Mr. Camping says, that would sure cut out a lot of meetings I wouldn't have to go to..." You see, there can be a silver lining to every cloud! And now that May 21 has come and gone without incident, we learn that Mr. Camping now says only that he miscalculated (to put it mildly!) and that the end will actually come this October. So we will no doubt go through all the hype once again in a few months.

While it is very tempting and very easy to make fun of Mr. Camping, we should resist that temptation out of a sense of Christian charity—after all, ridiculing someone is hardly an act of virtue. But this incident does serve to remind us that our reason for hope and the basis of our faith are in the person and words and deeds of Jesus Christ. Mr. Camping is simply another in a long line of individuals who were convinced in their own mind that they knew the future of the world and the human race along with very specific dates, times and places. These claims continue to be made in spite of the fact that they always prove to be wrong, and in spite of the very clear and explicit words of Jesus to the contrary. Recall how he responded to his disciples on another occasion when they asked him: "What will be the sign of your coming and the end of the world?" Jesus' response: "Be on guard. Let no one deceive you...As for the exact day or hour, no one knows it, neither the angels in heaven nor the Son, but the Father only."

So even Jesus himself did not claim to know all the details of the end times. Is it thus not far better for us to put our hope in the word spoken by Jesus and preserved by his Church than to place our trust in this kind of isolated, totally private interpretation of Scripture that has proven untrustworthy over and over again? We surely believe that the risen Christ will come again into this world in all his glory at the end of time as eternal king and judge. But we do not know when that will happen, and we are not intended to know those details. It might be this October, it might be 10,000 years from now, or it could be tomorrow or even later today. Our task, our call is to live the gospel of Jesus Christ sincerely and genuinely every day, every moment so that we will always be ready for his coming—whether at the end of the world or at the moment of our own individual death.

The other recent event is actually more a continuation of what has been happening all too often—and that is the astonishing array of violent and destructive storms. Once again we are hit by a barrage of pictures and video, this time from Joplin, MO where last weekend's tornado killed over 100 people and the fatality count continues to rise. I read of one Catholic parish in Joplin—St. Mary—where both the church and rectory were completely destroyed. The parish priest was inside the rectory at the time, though amazingly enough he escaped injury. He told a reporter that while the storm was raging, he said within himself: “You know, God, if this is the way it's meant to be, you know how much I love you.”

We might indeed be a little on edge these last few weeks and months as these storms and other natural disasters seem to be coming more frequently, although our 24/7 media may be making us more aware of them more rapidly than in the past. Given our curious human nature, we try to make sense of these things—and we probably should not be overly surprised that some sincerely (even if misguidedly) try to fit all this into a larger prediction for an end-time scenario, or we might wonder for why God is punishing us in this way. But again we turn to St. Peter's challenge: to know where our hope is based and to be able to explain the reasons for our hope. Jesus never promised that any of us would ever be free from experiencing the storms of life—whether actual tornados or other crises or difficulties. Our hope is based not on an expectation of not ever having to carry any crosses; in fact, Jesus made crystal clear that we would have to do precisely that. Rather, our hope is on what Jesus has done for us and what he has accomplished for us. He won the victory over all the suffering, pain, ridicule, evil and even the death he endured...because he rose from the dead.

We cannot overemphasize or affirm too often that fundamental cornerstone of our Christian faith: the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Once again it is why we celebrate a whole Easter season of fifty days instead of just Easter Sunday. Jesus really rose from the dead; he was seen and heard by those who knew he had died, and he really ascended into heaven (we will celebrate that Ascension next weekend) where he promised he would prepare a place for us. All that Jesus said about himself, all his promises, all his teachings were confirmed and verified once and for all by his resurrection. That and that alone is the ultimate reason for our hope and our faith. We should never be hesitant or afraid or embarrassed to explain or share that good news with those who may ask us the reason for our hope—no matter what form the Cross may take in our lives in the meantime. As we hear in Psalm 46: “God is for us a refuge and strength, a helper close at hand, in time of distress: so we shall not fear though the earth should rock, though the mountains fall into the depths of the sea...The Lord of hosts is with us: the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” Indeed he is—the God of Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. All thanks and praise to God who has given us this rock-solid foundation for our faith and this most certain reason for our hope.