

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER – B
(May 3, 2009)
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So many of the decisions we make, the preferences we express have nothing to do with right or wrong, or good or evil—they are simply our opinions. For example, my favorite color is blue, but that doesn't mean that everyone else must also have blue as their favorite color. But there are other areas that go beyond questions of taste or personal preference. I'm thinking here in the area of faith, particularly our Christian faith. Did you catch those very strong words from St. Peter in our first reading? In speaking to the elders and leaders of the people about salvation, he did not say 'it doesn't matter what you believe' or anything like that. Listen again to his words about Jesus: "There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved."

Peter could not have been more clear: humanity has one savior and one only: Jesus Christ. And lest you think Peter was maybe exaggerating a bit, think again. He is only restating what Jesus himself said at the Last Supper. St. John's gospel records Jesus saying "I am the way, the truth and the life [not just 'a way, but the way']; no one comes to the Father but through me." In today's gospel, Jesus as the Good Shepherd says he must also lead the other sheep belonging to other folds so that 'there shall be one flock, one shepherd.'

Rather bold claims, aren't they? Some might even say arrogant or even intolerant—one of today's favorite buzzwords. Yet these claims are at the heart of authentic Christianity: Jesus and he alone is both God and man; by his death and resurrection Jesus and he alone is savior of the world. This is important because today there are many who, even if not calling Jesus arrogant, still try to gut his words of their obvious meaning. You have no doubt heard the claims: 'all religions are the same'; 'we're all trying to get to the same place; we're just going on different paths'; 'it doesn't matter what religion you follow'. I remember Fr. Jon Seda (former associate pastor here at St. Ed's) telling me once about one of his fellow seminarians who would say things like "Jesus may be my savior, but I can't say he's savior for everyone else." I don't know if that guy ever got ordained; if so, I surely hope he learned his Catholic faith a lot better than that.

To say that all religions are not the same is neither arrogant nor narrow-minded; it's just reality—it is simply stating an obvious truth. In so many ways, Christianity is totally unique among all the religions of the world and of history. While most if not all religions surely do talk about the importance of loving one another and doing good and avoiding evil, religion involves more than ethics alone—it's more than how we are to live and conduct ourselves (important as that surely is). You can't just lump Jesus together with Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius or others and say they are all alike because they said the same things—they most certainly did not.

--though Mohammed (founder of Islam) encouraged prayer and gave a system of religious discipline, he rejected the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation (God the Son becoming man in the person of Jesus);

--though Buddha talked about an inner enlightenment, he never claimed to be the light of the world, nor did he ever say that no one comes to the Father except through him;

--though Confucius taught a moral way of life based on good and evil, he never died on a cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.

So: Jesus Christ is not just one of a number of options, not just one religious leader among many—he is totally unique, totally original...and he challenges us to decide one way or the other: to accept him or reject him (sitting on the fence, refusing to decide is not option). Christianity, therefore, is likewise totally unique—it is not like all other religions. It is founded on the One who claimed himself the only way to the Father, the only way to God's eternal kingdom. Obviously, the Church believes Jesus told the

truth (and **is** the truth); so do you and I believe that; otherwise, we wouldn't be here in this church building. Jesus' resurrection from the dead verified and confirmed all that he had said before—including that no one comes to the Father except through him. From its beginning with the testimony and preaching of Peter and the other apostles, the Church taught and continues to teach that Jesus is the only Savior of the world—salvation comes through Christ and him alone. Back in the year 2000, the Church issued a formal teaching statement “Dominus Iesus” (The Lord Jesus) in which these truths were strongly and unconditionally reaffirmed: “It must be *firmly* believed that, in the mystery of Jesus Christ...the full revelation of divine truth is given.”

So then comes the next question: what about non-Christians—those who do not explicitly believe in Jesus as savior, those who are not baptized...can they be saved? The Church teaches that yes, indeed, they too can be saved—but their salvation comes about only by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as it does for us. A few points need to be made here:

--the fact that non-Christian faiths do not profess Christ as savior does not mean that those religions are worthless or evil. Vatican II reminds us that the Catholic Church ‘rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions’ and indeed considers whatever goodness and truth is found in those religions to be a ‘preparation for the gospel’; that is, a preparation to receive Christ.

--it must be acknowledged that there are and have been countless numbers of people in history and even in our own time who have never had the chance to accept Christ because they never heard of him, nor have they heard the gospel proclaimed. It would be unthinkable that they would be condemned to eternal separation from God simply because they were not visible members of the Church due to circumstances beyond their control. Again from Vatican II: “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart...and try in their actions to do his will...those too may achieve eternal salvation.”

In any event, however, their salvation comes about in Christ and only in Christ. The Church's teaching in no way contradicts or minimizes the firm truth expressed so well by St. Peter that there is no salvation in anyone other than Jesus Christ. It all comes down to this: everyone who comes to eternal salvation will do so by Jesus Christ and him alone, whether they have an explicit knowledge of Jesus or not. Pope John Paul II put it this way: “Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all...For those...who have not received the Gospel proclamation...salvation is accessible in mysterious ways...as divine grace is granted to them by virtue of Christ's redeeming sacrifice.” See? Once again the truth is clearly affirmed: all salvation comes through Jesus and him alone.

The centrality of Christ and his unique role as the one and only savior of the world is the primary reason for the Church's missionary work. Jesus told the apostles to proclaim the gospel to all nations, and the Church continues that essential work today as it has done since the time of those apostles. This missionary work isn't just something the Church does as an extra, if there is some leftover time or resources. Rather, it is a central and essential element of the Church's nature and her reason for being—so that as many as possible can come to a full and explicit knowledge of Christ and thereby embrace and accept the gift of eternal life that only he can offer.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus longs to gather all the sheep into his one fold so that he can be the one shepherd of that one flock. May that day come soon; may God grant us the wisdom and grace to know and do our part to make that day come.