

“No one comes to the Father except by me.”

John 14:6b

A sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter

Pope Francis is 85 years old, and we can expect a new pope in the next few years. Every time a new pope is elected people want to know: What’s he like? No matter who he is, some people are shocked to find out: Why, yes, the Pope is Catholic.

After a new pope is elected, there is a ceremony called an investiture, in which the new pope is given the authority and regalia of the papacy. During this ceremony a pallium is put around his neck. A pallium is like a stole, only it’s put on backwards from the way a stole is usually worn. Why is the pallium important? Because a pallium was what was put around the neck of the Roman Emperor when he was crowned Emperor. The pallium is a relic of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church is simply the Roman Empire continuing without the politics of the Roman Empire.

At their investiture popes used to be crowned with the papal tiara or triple crown. But that is no longer done. Pope John Paul I (1978, Pope for 33 days) discontinued the papal crown. The papal ring is important but not really important. What is important is that before the ceremony elevating the one elected to the papacy, the ring and the pallium are placed overnight on St. Peter’s Tomb because that is the way of establishing the continuity that Catholics claim goes back through the popes to Peter himself. The apostle Peter was not the successor of Christ but the vicar of Christ. As “the Vicar of Christ” he is delegated to act on Christ’s behalf.

There’s really no question that both Peter and Paul died in Rome. But it is out of the question that anybody knows where their tombs or bones are because when somebody was executed as a rebel or slave in those days, the bodies were thrown in the River Tiber. The idea that some would know where the bones of Peter or Paul are is simply not possible. Seventy years ago there were excavations under the Vatican trying to establish or find the tomb and bones. This is a place where there was a kind of memorial to Peter, called a Tropaion. We know about it first from about 180 A.D. The archeologist digging down there found a box of bones. The big news was they had found Peter’s grave and found his bones, until somebody pointed out that it was a female skeleton. Then the whole thing disappeared from the news.

The important thing is that the pallium was placed on the so-called tomb and then placed on the shoulders of the new pope, establishing his authority.

Back in 2005 Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Pope and took the name, Benedict XVI. In the conclave (closed meeting) leading up to his election, he gave a lecture that gained worldwide attention because he spoke about “the fundamentalism of relativism.” He went on to spell out that there are all kinds of relativisms today. The difficulty today is that while “fundamentalism” is a dirty word among us and today when this phrase was lifted up in the news, the media called it “the dictatorship of relativism.” Those whose thinking is relativistic are as much dictators as anybody else. When pointing to those who are holding to some kind of truth, something basic, they then insist on relativism.

We all face this question: In a world which seems to have gone to pieces. What’s what, and where it’s all going? Relativism has taken over, chaos is upon us, and let’s hang on to something. In that particular lecture before the conclave Pope Benedict said relativism afflicts the church, too.

What a relief that a world Christian leader addressed the problem of relativism. We may be tempted to conclude that we can make common cause with Rome, as the saying goes: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

That raises the question: Is Rome our friend? One of the things that was lifted up in the discussion after Ratzinger was elected Pope is that in 1999 at the world level there was an agreement between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on justification by faith. It’s called *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. Ratzinger was involved in this process before he was elected Pope. In fact, it was reported that the agreement on justification would have collapsed had not the eminent Cardinal Ratzinger intervened. The problem is the final agreement did not honor the Reformation rediscovery of the truth of the gospel but muted it. The Lutherans had caved in. This agreement was nevertheless touted as ground-breaking, as healing the breach between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. But in fact what happened is that the Lutheran leaders gave away the family farm.

We ask ourselves: What is the truth? What do we say in the face of a world that seems to have gone wild? John 14:6 reads: “Jesus said, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me.’”

What is truth? Truth is a person. Not some idea about truth. Truth is this particular person and not Allah, Buddha, Confucius, or whomever else. This person is the truth. That's a totally different category. Truth is this person who died on the cross and rose for you and me.

We are tempted sometimes to say: "Well, the truth is in the church." Of course, that's the Roman Catholic and Orthodox answer. The church is what is fundamental. At the opposite extreme, the truth is in a conversion experience or decision I've made.

In fact the truth is in a third and totally different way. Truth is this person who died on the cross and rose again for you and me. That's totally different.

When Cardinal Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI, the Anglican Archbishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu, said of the new Pope: "He was not my choice." And then Tutu added: "God is not a Christian." Tutu was, of course, not alone in thinking this. Many people have the idea there is some sort of "Godness," a general "Godness," and that some hold that Jesus is God, and others hold that Buddha is, and others, Allah. They hold that whatever you feel comfortable with is O.K. because it's all the same thing.

In his lecture before the conclave Ratzinger described relativism in terms of the famous parable found in the Buddhist tradition of the six blind men. An elephant was brought to them, and they were told: "Now you can feel what an elephant is like." One felt the leg and said: "He's like a tree." One felt the elephant's side and said: "He's like a wall." One stroked the tail and said: "He's like a rope." And so forth for all six of them. To which then Ratzinger made the important point: "They're all blind."

They are all blind and the point made by the Gospel message is that our eyes have been opened. And eyes that are open see the one who died and rose again. The important thing to remember is not that Jesus is God but that God is Jesus. It makes all the difference in the world. "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). As John 14:6b adds: "No one comes to the Father, but by me."

What does this do for Joe Sixpack? What does it mean for you and me? It is commonly said among us that there is nothing sure except death and taxes. We have to pay our taxes, and we can't avoid death. We try not to think about such things. We do all kinds of things to preserve something of our lives. Put an

impressive headstone over my grave. Make a name for myself that lasts beyond my death. Underneath we know what's inevitable: Death and taxes.

What is there for sure? That is really the question of relativism over against what is fundamental. The Christian message is that which is certain. It doesn't depend on you and me. God died in Jesus Christ and rose again for our salvation. It changes everything. It means the frantic life we lead and all those things we get involved in (which, to be sure, have their place) are secondary. The truth of the Gospel gives us a perspective. It changes what we're doing. It changes where we're going. We're headed toward another world, his kingdom, where "he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more" (Rev 21:4). It gives us the certainty and therefore the freedom now, the freedom to be his creatures here and now. John 14:6: "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, except by me." Amen