

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – A CYCLE

At some time, and probably many times, over the past week we have all passed a lot of stores selling a lot of stuff. We may have even passed a storage facility or two – places to store all the stuff we can't store somewhere else. The media – television, the internet, newspapers, magazines – they're all filled with ads explaining why we need more and more stuff. It's new and improved and, for a limited time it's even for a reduced price! And in between the ads we can watch television shows that teach us how to organize, arrange, use and display different kinds of stuff.

The Scriptures aren't nearly as excited about all this stuff as we are. For example, in that first reading from Acts, we hear of the people's response to the great sermon that Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost. He's just said, in so many words, that the only stuff that counts is God's stuff, and those who are hearing the message are asking the most basic question any of us can ask, "What are we to do?" How can we get God's stuff, this graced sense of well-being that stretches into eternity? Peter's answer: repent for your sins, be baptized and enter into a relationship with the risen Lord.

In the second reading from I Peter, the apostle spells out something of what that relationship is all about. Jesus, he says, because of his great love for us, bore the weight of our sins. He healed us and gave us strength and hope. This is God's stuff. This is what we really need.

And then the gospel and words we've all heard over and over: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." More about God's stuff, but nothing about the so-called prosperity gospel: wealth, possessions, things like that. Why? Because no matter what you

might hear from some televangelist, material wealth is not a sign of God's favor, nor should it drive or dominate us. If that's the only abundance we seek, we're going to wind up just like the people who listened to Peter's sermon: empty lives full of stuff that doesn't really matter, and hopefully asking, "What are we to do?" How can we get God's stuff, a life of abundance, infinite abundance?

Peter says that if you want God's stuff you follow in the footsteps of Jesus. You call into question some of the fundamental values of the world we live in, the ones that make things more important than people, even if it does seem like a thankless, discouraging task.

If he were preaching today, I suspect that Peter would hit hard on things like this. Almost one sixth of the people in the United States live in poverty, and the numbers are even higher among children and seniors. Internationally the numbers are even more alarming. Globally almost half of all children live in poverty and far too many die of diseases that could easily have been avoided. Millions of people are still illiterate and about eighty percent of all the people who live on this planet live on less than ten dollars a day, and many of these people, including children, work in abysmal conditions for almost nothing to satisfy our – notice I said "our" – almost insatiable desire for more and more stuff at lower and lower prices.

Now you know as well as I do that, when it comes to changing a world like this, just about anything we do isn't going to be much more than a drop in the old bucket. Still, embracing the challenge of this morning's/evening's readings can certainly make some difference somewhere. We can, for example, take note of how what we buy affects the livelihood and well-being of those who make the things we buy. Do the workers at all levels, from those who gather and work with the raw materials to the salesman who sells us whatever, do they receive what the church calls a "living wage?" Do they work in conditions appropriate and conducive to human dignity,

especially in the Third World, or are they treated as just more disposable resources? Do we base our decisions at the cash register and in the voting booth on our pocketbooks or on their impact on the most vulnerable members of the human community?

Can any of us over the long haul really do things like this? Maybe for a week, maybe even for a month, but beyond that? Well, yes, but if and only if, we're willing to rethink, question, and then pray over the values of a world where material success determines status and profits are more important than people. This is the first step in finding that abundance that Jesus offers, and once we get beyond that first step and take the second and the third, there's a rippling effect that starts to include others. It's about grace and the movement of grace. Spending less and less time acquiring and worrying about stuff can and does bring about change, even help to break some endless cycles of poverty, both here and abroad.

Question: does all the stuff we acquire and worry about bring us closer to God and others or does it tend to isolate us? When Jesus said, "I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly" he wasn't talking about that kind of stuff. I know that. You know that. It's no great secret. In the world of grace we all tend to get what we pay for.