

5 Sunday of Lent, A

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

One of the major difficulties some people have with the gospel is that it seems unrealistic to them. Few of these critics would deny that Jesus lived a good life or that he said some beautiful things. That, in fact, is the basis of their problem. As they see it, Jesus was so good and his teachings so beautiful that they simply do not fit in a world such as ours.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a philosopher named Joseph Renan published a book on the life of Jesus in which he described the Lord like this: **“Tenderness of heart was in him transformed into infinite sweetness, vague poetry, and universal charm.”**

If we were honest, we would have to admit we agree with that definition. There is a tendency on our part to think of Jesus as a man who saw life, not as it is, but as it ought to be. His message of love, his ethical code, and moral standards are marvelous beyond compare. We like to talk about them, sing about them, hear sermons about them, but we are not at all certain that they have any real place in what we think of - the real world.

So we come to Mass, and for a few moments, we think about life the way it ought to be. Then we leave this place of

refuge and go back out to deal with life the way it is. Jesus is “**infinite sweetness, vague poetry, universal charm,**” but the real world is cold, hard, cruel, and greedy. And somehow the two just don’t fit.

Isn’t that how we see it much, if not most, of the time? Well, in contrast to that concept, I want us to consider one sentence from today’s gospel reading. Speaking to his disciples the night before he died, Jesus said: “**I am the way, and the truth, and the life.**” In other words, our Lord thought of himself as a realist. As he saw it, his way was not a religious side street. It was the main road, the only road that was going anywhere. All other roads were blind alleys and dead-end streets. As he saw it, his teaching was not vague poetry about the way life ought to be; it was the plain truth about the way life is. As he saw it, his life was not a beautiful novelty to be admired and applauded. It was the real thing, the only kind of life that ultimately makes any sense or will really work.

“**I am the way, and the truth, and the life.**” That is how Jesus thought of himself, not as an idealist but as a realist, a man who faced up to life and dealt with it as it really is.

Let us consider that claim for a few moments and seek to discover whether there is any evidence to support it. Was Jesus an idealist or a realist? Did he live in the real world of facts or in

a dream world of fantasy? Think first of his ideas and insights about the inner workings of our personal lives. He believed and taught that one of the worst things about sin is what it does to the sinner, himself. He said that some people's lives were like tombs, that on the outside they may look neat, but on the inside they were awful. He told a story about a young man who threw restraint and responsibility away, went his own way, and ended up in the pig pen of life. He taught that the only effective way to deal with sin is to face it, confess it, repent of it, and accept the cleansing of forgiveness.

Now, is that a dream world or is it the real world? When Jesus taught us to pray, **“forgive us our sins,”** was he dealing with fact or fantasy?

Put that question to any competent counselor, and he or she could tell you all kinds of stories about what guilt does when allowed to fester in the human heart. And that same counselor would also tell you that the only way to resolve such problems is to bring the source of guilt out in the open and expose it to the fresh air of confession and forgiveness.

One of the amazing things about Jesus is his profound insights into human nature. We cannot help but wonder how a first-century **“carpenter”** knew so much about the inner workings of individual lives.

2,000 years ago, Jesus was saying things about people that modern psychology continues to confirm. Maybe we should take him a bit more seriously. It could be that he lived in a real world that most of us have not yet even discovered.

On this subject, our Lord had one central theme to which he returned repeatedly - the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. He believed and taught that humanity is basically a family. And he presented that concept, not as an ideal, but as a fact. God is Father, and men and women of all nations are brothers and sisters. That is what Jesus thought and taught about humanity.

And in this fragmented, unfriendly world, that must surely seem an incredibly idealistic thought. But maybe we should think again. Could it be that the real reason behind social strife and misery is the refusal of humanity to face the fact that we are a family? And could it also be that the only way we will ever solve our social problems and differences is based on cooperation and goodwill, just like any sensible family does?

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It seems to me that we would be very unwise to dismiss this Christ as an idealistic dreamer. There is evidence to suggest that he may be the only true realist among us. When Renan called him **“infinite sweetness, vague poetry, universal charm,”** he

was talking sentimental nonsense. And if we try to make him that, we are only fooling ourselves. Jesus told it like it really is: **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Amen.**