

SUNDAY EASTER 4: MAY 2nd 2010

Acts 14:21b-27; John 13:31-35

Notes:

- We know from 14:6 that Derbe was one of the towns to which Paul had gone to preach the Good News. His preaching brought many men and women to become disciples of Jesus Christ.
- Paul then engages in a pastoral visitation of all of the towns he has already evangelised. That sounds easy but just a couple of lines earlier he had been stoned and dragged outside of the city walls by the Jews. The crowd had been stirred up by the leaders of the Jewish community and they set out to kill him. Here we see the considerable courage of Paul in that he continues to preach the Good News and carry out his ministry – despite the abuse and threats.
- Paul's task is the stabilization of the communities which are under threat by the stirring and troublemaking of their leaders. He encourages them to remain faithful in the face of these attacks.
- When Paul talks of the "many hardships" the word he uses is that of "afflictions" and these take us back to Luke's Gospel when he talks of the sufferings that are going to be associated with the time of the Lord's return.
- In vs 22 Paul talks about entering the Kingdom of God. He seems to be suggesting that we are moving towards that Kingdom and that there are some pre-conditions that must be met before we can enter into it. That basic precondition is suffering for the Gospel. There is no kingdom living without imitating Christ in his death.
- Paul appointed elders and commissioned them through the laying on of hands. It is clear from this text, and others, that the early apostolic community had a wide range of various elders and leaders. It was not charismatic with no ordering of leadership.

This section of the story of Acts makes it very clear that Paul's ministry was not an easy one and not everyone simply rolled over and took to hear what he was preaching. Here in Lystra we see a vicious example of what people are capable of if they can convince themselves that they are doing the work of God. They drag Paul out, stone him and thinking that he is dead drag him to the edge of the town. In leaving him there they are insulting him in death as they punished him in life. There was no burial and so the wild animals will gnaw at him and he will be mocked and laughed at.

Paul the prophet is causing great divisions within the community with the newly converted Gentiles up against the unrepentant leaders of the Jews. He is both loved and hated. The Gentiles flock to him and wherever he goes new communities of believers are started up under the Holy Spirit. But for every community of the faithful there always seems to be a handful of those who will resist him at every step of the way. So consumed are they by their hatred that they multiply evil upon evil, ending up by attempting to stone him to death. It cannot help but make us wonder just how men who pride themselves as being paragons of virtue, faithful teachers and defenders of the Law can get it so wrong.

But it is all about power and the exercise of power. These leaders have so much to lose as more and more Gentiles come to follow Christ and as we saw last week they are driven by envy and jealousy and thus blinded they lose sight of what God wants them to do and how he is now calling them to respond. They become the centre of their ministries and Paul becomes a threat.

But Paul stands out as a remarkable witness to ministry in the face of hardship. He does not strike back at them. He does not set his new communities against these men. What he does in fact is get

on with his vocation. He resumes his mission and what we see is a holy man who continues on in the face of adversity.

It would be wrong to see this as just an example of Paul's courage. It is about something more significant. It is about faithfulness to the Gospel. It is about a passion for the Truth of the Gospel and a belief that God will ultimately be the one who proves him to be righteous. He does not have to win his own battles. God will do that for him and that is the model of discipleship he offers to his fellow believers. Persevere in faithfulness and God will be victorious.

What is also interesting to note with the tactic of Paul. He does not re-enter the city and engage them in debate. He does not stand toe to toe with them and wear them down or try to bring them undone by his preaching and teaching. He does not gather together groups of friends and fellow missionaries and plan to bring down those bitter leaders. What he does is get back into his preaching and his teaching. He moves on. He gets on with the task at hand and endures the abuse for to be a disciple is to take on Christ's death as well as his resurrection.

These all seem to be fragile communities and it is worthwhile noting how Paul goes about building and strengthening these communities. He urges them to persevere. He gathers them for prayer. He preaches and teaches the faith to them. He visits for pastoral care and he builds up a group of dedicated and committed leaders who will continue on the work he has already begun among them. Paul is not interested in the how of mission. The how will be worked out as the local faithful gather and share the Word of God and seek to live out together the commands of Christ. His missionary method is all about revealing Jesus Christ in their midst and bringing the community into Gospel living. What they need to do to strengthen and shape the community will become clear as they all work on it together.

Finally, Paul sees his missionary method as being the opening of the door of faith to the Gentiles. He is providing opportunities for them have a glimpse of what Kingdom life is all about, knowing that once they find Christ alive and with them, they will readily repent and turn to him. What a great image that is for the way we are called to live out our own faith. We need to live in a way that opens the doors of faith to those who do not know Christ. We are the entry spot for the peoples among whom we live and work and move. It would be a disaster if having been called to be the doors of faith, the peoples searching for a way into life with God find the door locked.

Notes to John 13:31-35

- The setting here is the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples and he was in the middle of his final meal with them but most importantly, he has washed their feet and commanded them to do likewise.
- When Judas left the room John notes that it was night. That is, the world was in darkness.
- What follows could only take place when Judas had left. Judas's way of life to this point makes it clear that he could never abide by what is now going to be taught.
- Oddly, the Son of Man is going to be glorified on the cross. How can a thing of such shame and horror be an occasion for glory?

The opening lines of today's reading almost equate to a cry of jubilation and joy. Judas leaves the room to go about his business of betraying the Son of Man and immediately Jesus makes a bold proclamation: *Now the Son of man has been glorified!* The hour has now come when the love of Jesus will be made most powerfully obvious. It will be on the cross that glory is given to Jesus and in his death on the cross glory will be given to God.

When John uses the word glory in his gospel he is talking about the revelation of God himself. We can see something of God when his glory is revealed. For John this is what happened on Mt Sinai during the Exodus. God revealed something of who he was and how he would relate to his people. Similarly here on Golgotha. In the death of Jesus we will understand something of the ways of God. What will we know? That there is no limit to the love he has for us. He is prepared to allow his only Son to be unfairly judged, harshly dealt with and put to death. That is the measure of divine love.

It is a powerfully tender moment as we see in the way he addresses his disciples. They must be bewildered by what has been happening and so it is with affection and gentleness that he turns to them with his last teaching and final words of encouragement.

He will be leaving them and as he has already indicated to the Jews, where he is going they are unable to come. He has to tell them that because they too do not understand that he is leaving to return to the Father from whence he came. He is not running away. He is in a very real sense, going home. Despite their ignorance and what at times is indifference, arrogance and all round inability to comprehend who he is and what he is doing, he still loves them. He still calls them his little children. He is not abandoning them, despite their silliness and sins.

It is in this context, on the eve of the crucifixion, that Jesus gives them a new commandment and that commandment is simple and profound: *love one another*. Jesus has already made it clear: *as I have washed your feet, so you should wash each other's feet*. Now that example is turned into a commandment: *Love one another just as I have loved you*. This commandment must be interpreted in the light of the cross. The sign of Jesus love, the reality of his love, the practical application of this divine love is the crucifixion. This is the way he defines the love the disciples need to have for one another. They too must be ready and willing to give over their lives for the sake and wellbeing of another person. They have to empty themselves, and with no exceptions and no escape clauses, they have to reach out to everyone in love. This is such a radical innovative teaching. The whole of the law, the teaching of God, the divine will that has been revealed to us is now able to be summed up in this one, new commandment. Disciples must love one another.

For John, what the disciples do when they love others is make present the saving reality of Jesus. This is what it is all about and why it transcends likes and dislikes, categories like friends and enemies, comfortable and uncomfortable and all of the ways in which the world around us categorizes people and relationships. As Jesus loved saints and sinners alike and showed this through his death on the cross, so we are to love others. This is the mark of a disciple.

Conclusion:

One of the scary aspects of this reading today is the final statement: *by this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples*. If we ever wanted to sit down and measure our own discipleship or that of our parish or our faith community, this is the measure we are to use: *how good are we at loving and showing that love?* Is the love of Christ visible in the way we treat others. Is it such that people outside of the Church can sit back and say: these people are disciples of Jesus Christ. Look at how they love one another. Wow! That is scary.

It is all too easy to sum up our lives as disciples in terms of coming to Church and going through a range of motions and actions but they all mean nothing if there is no visible love, measurable love, loving actions that can be experienced and are life giving. It is no easy task which is why in this Gospel, the love commandment is intimately associated with the cross. Take the dying to self out of the Church and you have no Church. Remove the cross from the way we deal with one another and you do not have a Christian exchange.

We are still in Easter time, a time when we are being urged to do something about the way we are actually living in the Church. Paul offers us an example of what to do in the face of persecution, misunderstanding and abuse: get on with what God calls you to be and be doing. Let him sort out the sins of others. It is not our task to execute our versions of human justice on anyone. Jesus too shows us how to transform the world: love without counting the personal cost and love everyone without exception. Be willing to die to someone else, whatever we think they may or may not have done to us. What remains unwritten at the end of this commandment but is clear from the whole story is that if we feel that we are unable to do this then there is no room for us at the table. Like Judas we are left with no option but to walk out into the darkness of the night.