

SUNDAY EASTER 5: MAY 9TH 2010

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29; John 14:23-29

Notes:

- The people came down to Antioch where Paul and Barnabas had been staying and preaching. These people were probably from the so called “Pharisaic party”. They believed that the Christians should be circumcised as this was the traditional rite of entry into the family of the children of Abraham.
- Circumcision is never an object of criticism in Luke. Indeed, he has some of the key characters undergo circumcision: John the Baptist, Jesus, Timothy and probably more but for Luke it is never a rite that is necessarily associated with righteousness. It is always a good and pious custom of the people.
- Interestingly, there was debate in the Judaism of the time of Jesus about just what circumcision meant and about its place in the religion. For many it was a symbol of a life that was meant to be lived and not an act having value in itself. Others even debated as to whether or not proselytes actually needed to be circumcised (see Josephus Antiquities 20:38-48).
- The Judaizers who were opposed to Paul (in Galatia) did not insist that the converts take on the traditions of Moses if they wanted to be saved. This is an extreme group within the Christian sect.
- Clearly a robust debate followed this.
- It is clear in verse 22 that there was a group in the early community that represented a voice of authority. The key players are Peter and James, which for Luke is another important link back to Jesus – apostles/bishops.
- The decision made by the Council was made by the Holy Spirit and “ourselves”. That is the line of authority in the Church - The Holy Spirit speaking through the apostolic line which is ministering in the midst of the church gathered together in Jesus name. It was being together in Christ that mattered.
- What is set out is not the minimum list of things that are required for salvation. They represent a list of the things that are necessary for having the community live in peace with Jews and Gentiles finding ways of living together.
- The question regarding the meat sacrificed to idols refers to the flesh that was left after once the sacrifice had been made. It was usually prime quality meat and given that it was left over suggests that the original sacrifice was of some considerable size. This meat would be taken to the markets and sold. The issue was about the status of the meat. If they ate they meat were they somehow eating “polluted” meat as it had been tainted by the pagan sacrifice. The Jerusalem decree forbids it.

The story in Acts today refers to what is called the Council of Jerusalem and for Luke it is a significant event both in the life of the Church and also in Luke’s story of the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. Its significance is in that an apostolic edict was issued declaring what was to be considered as being formal Church teaching. Up until this council gathers for its meeting, the priority was the mission to the Jews. After the Council we see the mission to the Gentiles being given priority.

This account of the Council’s decision is important because in it Luke links the mission of the Church to the mission of God in the past. It is not that everything God had been doing in and through Israel now came to an end and that all of the laws and prophecies were no longer needed. What we see in the discussions of the Council and the material leading up to it is that God is continuing on his work of salvation, first of all in Jesus Christ and then through the Church who ministers in the name of Jesus. The People of God are still the people of God, only now they are more correctly called the New People of God as they include the people of the New Covenant that was made in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But what is also important is that Luke sees this Council and its decree as a way of assisting the community of believers to overcome their differences. They were at loggerheads over the place of the Gentiles and as to what might be spiritually demanded of those who came to believe in Jesus. The teaching of the Council was seen as an opportunity to bind people together across their differences. Yes, the Jews and the Gentiles were at odds, were seeing things differently but they did share a common vision and a common mission and it was this shared vocation that should enable them to transcend their differences.

He says that some people were “disturbed and have unsettled minds” by what was going on and this has been caused by people who have no authority to be teaching and preaching what they were saying. They had other agendas and he was encouraging the community to not listen to those whose motives were suspect. They were to turn instead to the teachings of the apostles, to the ways of the Church for that was the way of God.

And it worked. We can see in verses 30-35 that the community, upon hearing the message from the Council were “delighted”. They felt “encouraged” and this enabled them to come together with others for the sake of the gospel. It is a wonderful example of the healing powers of the Good News, that people who once misunderstood each other could now come together in a shared ministry. In some ways the two different camps stayed the same. One would insist on observing the customs of Moses while the others would not be circumcised. Both could find life in the Kingdom. In Christ differences are overcome but the key to it all was bringing the Church together in the Holy Spirit.

This is a powerful message for the Church of every age. The only matter of significance for the Church is its mission and that mission takes it outside of itself into the world in which Christians find themselves living. The Church only begins to fall apart, squabble, age and decline when it moves its focus away from those who do not know Christ and focuses primarily on itself and its own activities. The world is not interested in the sordid squabbles of the Church, it has enough of its own. What the world wants to see is why living in the Kingdom of God is worthwhile, why believing in Jesus Christ can change their lives for the better.

This is what the Council of Jerusalem stressed. It warned about the dangers of listening to *certain members of the party of the Pharisees* and the *men who came down from Judea and taught the brothers.....* They were to evaluate for themselves what was going on and to look at all that was being said in the light of the Gospel, the Good News as it had been proclaimed by the apostles. Only then could people be “delighted” and feel “encouraged”.

It is a timely message for our own Church as the temptation will always be there to spend more time on ourselves than on the people of the world we have been called to serve. Building programmes, liturgical tweaking, musical extravaganzas and endless meetings, discussions and budget plans will not grow the Church. But they can be wonderful distractions. It is great to have a project on the run that looks good, feels good and is impressive but with Luke we need to be asking ourselves: *How does this help us to preach the Gospel to the poor in our community, to those who do not know God?* If it does not then we really should pause and think about whether or not we should continue on with it.

Similarly, not everything we hear said is true. The world and the Church always has people who *come down from Judea* or *who are from the party of the Pharisees*. The Council warns us to judge them in the light of the Gospel. Test every new idea as to whether or not it enhances our Gospel mission. Test everything a person says or teaches to see whether or not it reveals Jesus Christ to the world. Check on what we hear and if it is not designed to build up the Body of Christ, then we should think carefully about how we engage with it. There is only one way for the Christian community in this story from Acts and that is the way of the Church in mission. Nothing else matters.

Notes: John 14:23-31

- This final section of chapter 14 of John's Gospel returns to the theme of the departure of Jesus. We are reminded of the coming of the paraclete (25-26), the gift of peace (27) and the departure to the Father 27-31).
- Verse 25 is the only verse in the entire New Testament where this term *The Holy Spirit* is to be found and presumably, in the early community the terms *Paraclete* and *Holy Spirit* had come to mean the same thing.
- The Father is presented as being the one who sends the Holy Spirit and this Spirit is sent *in Jesus' name*.
- The Spirit will help the apostles to remember all the things that Jesus had taught them but also take them deeper into the meaning of those teachings.
- The gift of Jesus to the apostles is *Peace* and this *shalom* is what the messiah was said to be bringing: Isaiah 9:6-7; 52:7; 57:19; Haggai 2:9).
- When Jesus says *if you loved me* (vs.28) he is using it in a conditional way, suggesting that the love they have at the moment is not at the level it should be or needs to be (for the trials and difficulties that await them). Their love is possessive – about themselves and what they want – and therefore they do not want Jesus to leave them.
- The *Ruler of this world* is Satan and the way John presents him here gives the suggestion of a struggle going on between the forces of evil and darkness and the forces of good and light. But Jesus makes it clear, that while he might be on his way he *has no power over me*.

We are still with Jesus at the Last Supper and he continues to teach them about his approaching death and his overall place in God's plan of salvation. For us today, as we move towards the feast of Pentecost, there are four key messages that will assist us in our lives as disciples and in the work of the Church.

The first wonderful message is that the Father will send the Spirit. You can imagine how important this reminder was to the early community. They were still going through a time of great chaos and persecution. It must have seemed that the world around them hated them and abused them, there were martyrdoms, persecutions, they were forbidden to pray in the synagogues and they would have still been coming to terms with the destruction that had taken place at the hands of the Roman army during the Jewish wars. They were also buffeted around by men with a variety of agendas, with sects, break away groups and all kinds of false and misleading prophets. It seemed as though the Church was struggling with forces outside of itself as well as evils within itself. Where on earth could they find strength to continue? The answer from John is simple: their hope is in God. God has sent the Spirit upon the Church to be its hope and its strength. If it was struggling then it was struggling because it had moved God from its centre, it was living according to the ways of the world rather than by the grace of God. The Church had to be led by the Spirit or it would remain in the doldrums, buffeted from without and from within and would eventually be overwhelmed by the world it was called to serve.

But what Jesus does offer is the gift of Peace. This is the second message. What is interesting about this gift is that it is something that can only come from God. Jesus gives peace as a gift. Peace was understood to be what happened when the People of God lived a life of faithfulness to the covenant, it was a state of being that came about because they were united to God. They did not gain peace but were given peace. It overtook them, enveloped them, nourished them, comforted them and gave them strength and hope. It did all of this because essentially it was a part of God himself. God could give peace because he was peace.

We see this best after the resurrection when Jesus appears to the disciples in the room in Jerusalem. There they are, surrounded by their enemies and he stands there and says "Peace be with you"! For the early Church this was a powerful message. Their Peace was Christ.

Their hope was Christ and it did not matter what else was going on around them, they could always have Peace if Christ was at their centre.

That takes us to the third insight, for it is in this context that we need to understand John's reference to Satan. It is as though he was acknowledging that there would always be "powers" and "rulers of this world" who would seek to harm them, who would tempt them to sin and who would try to distract them from the ways of the Kingdom. But if they kept their lives built around Jesus then they would know Peace in even the darkest of moment. It is a test of faith. They could trust in Christ or they could rely on themselves.

Finally, there is the warning about "selfish love". This is perhaps the toughest message of all and it must have hit the readers hard. Selfish love is the easiest love of all and it can so easily disguise itself as healthy love. Selfish love is the love that I extend when all is well, when God and others affirm me, act in ways of which I approve, that fit in with my own agenda and timetable. Here it is seen as a love that they have for Jesus as long as he is not going to return to the Father. They will love him and follow him – but there are limits and there are conditions.

That is a love that will not bring peace for what is at the centre of life is not Christ but ourselves. In every problem facing the Church today, if we scratch below the surface, we will find this selfish love, this conditional love. But it never works and one of the signs that it is not working is that we end up with a way of life that has little peace in it. But it does not have to be that way. If we were to follow the Spirit of God and return to Christ modelled lives then we would know peace. It really is a simple as that, which is why the fundamental message of the Gospel is: Repent!

Conclusion:

Our readings are readings of hope and encouragement and they point us in a single direction. They stress the unity that a life in Christ brings. It does not matter whether we are Jews or Gentiles, whether we are from the *party of the Pharisees*, the *men who came down from Judea*, the *party of James* or the *followers of Paul*, in Christ there is room for all. If the Church is to be one then it has to return to this fundamental vocation of being Christ modelled. When it is Christ modelled it is sacrificial, it is missionary, it is forgiving, loving, caring and gentle. When it is Christ modelled it is obeying the Father's wishes by getting out into the world and preaching the Good News of God's salvation and so it is a faith community that knows Peace.

All this remains possible because the Father has sent the Spirit to us. We all share the same Spirit, we are all one in the Spirit and one in the Lord and that is all that counts. In a world full of division and fear the Church should be a safe haven of Peace, Healing and Reconciliation. It should be the community to which people turn when they wonder how they will continue to go on living, wonder about the meaning of their time here on earth and search for affirmation and love. But we can only do that when we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit rather than being overwhelmed by our own spirits, our own selfish love or by the ways of the world around us.

They are readings of great hope but we still have to do the walking ourselves. It is really up to us to follow Christ if this is how we want to be living.