

Sunday May 4th THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts: 5:27-32, 40-41 - A reminder of the background. The close associates of Jesus, all good Orthodox Jews, had been punished for using the Temple precincts as a venue for preaching the Good News about Jesus. And now they're at it again. There is a dramatic confrontation with the Temple authorities, with Peter leading their defence. It's perhaps a pity the editor of today's reading has chosen to chop off the passage about Gamaliel's sage advice to his colleagues: if this new movement is nothing but a flash in the pan it will fizzle out of its own accord: but if it truly is by God's will, nothing you can do will stop it. I recommend reading the whole of chapter five of Acts - Luke is an accomplished storyteller who knows how to capture the reader's attention.

Second Reading: Apocalypse 5:11-14 - In highly charged poetic language the writer sees the throne of God surrounded by attendant spirits and in His presence the sacrificed Lamb is proclaimed as the one who has made, "of every race, language and nation, a line of kings and priests to serve God and to rule the world". An important note for us today: no distinction of class or hierarchy: "we" are that nation. Clearly a prophetic text considering that at the time of writing Christians were a tiny, persecuted minority in the all-powerful Roman empire.

Gospel: John 21:1-19 - Generally considered to be an appendix to the main body of the Gospel, this chapter adapts Luke's account of the miraculous catch of fish at the calling of the first disciples and places it in the context of the post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus. This final commissioning of the disciples opens on a subdued note, as though the followers of Jesus have still not grasped the import of Jesus' previous appearances to them, they've gone back to their old way of life. The disciples are presented with food - bread and fish, reminiscent of the feeding of the five thousand and symbolic of the Eucharistic food. Peter is singled out in a three-fold challenge, to become the leader of the flock.

Sunday May 11th FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

First Reading: Acts 13:14, 43-52 - Today's reading carries us forward from the earliest proclamation of the Good News to Paul's first missionary journey. We find him with his companion Barnabas in a city in the centre of what is now modern-day Turkey, preaching to fellow Jews in one of the synagogues of the Jewish Diaspora. It's easy to forget that the countries we now think of as predominantly Muslim, though they still have Christian minorities, was in the early days of the Church's history the vibrant central home of Christianity. After an initial welcome by the many who accepted his message, Paul was faced with opposition from those in the synagogue who could not accept what he was saying. We aren't given much insight into the nature of their objections, but Luke portrays this as a pivotal moment. It had been necessary to preach the Word to Judaism in the first place but now Paul felt free to turn to the non-Jewish world with a message of salvation for all the world.

Second Reading: Apocalypse 7:9, 14-17 - John's vision of the triumph of the Lamb (see last week's commentary) continues with the witness of this vast throng of people of every race and language, standing with the sheaves of palm branches, symbolic of victory, in their hands: these are they who have passed through the great persecution. Historically, this would have been the time of the great persecution under the Emperor Nero, but we can think of them as representing all the people of all time who have borne faithful witness to the Risen Lord and now enjoy eternal bliss.

Gospel: John 10:27-30 - Last Sunday we read of Jesus' command to Peter, Feed my sheep. In today's brief reading, which draws together elements contained in the first two readings, Jesus describes himself in terms of the Good Shepherd, who knows his flock. Palestinian shepherds called their own sheep from the common

fold each morning and led them out to pasture. The shepherd was something of an outcast in Jewish society because his work meant he wouldn't be able to respect all the tenets of the religious obligation. Good Pope Francis knew exactly what he was talking about when he advised bishops to know the smell of the sheep: he was thinking of clerical responsibility too easily becoming a bureaucratic desk job instead of being down there in the marketplace and in the homes and workplaces of the people.

Sunday May 18th **FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

First Reading: Acts 14:21-27 - Luke wanted to demonstrate both the resistance to the Good News and the inevitability of its progress. Opposition came from members of synagogues. Was this because Paul was suggesting that pagans could be admitted into the company of the Jesus followers or because proclaiming Jesus as being the long-awaited Messiah didn't fit in with their idea the Messiah as the one who would restore Israel? Opposition from the devotees of the local religions might have been connected with the loss of income temple authorities might fear. Despite great sufferings – Paul is left for dead after being stoned in Lystra (ironic in a way, since he'd assisted at the stoning of the first martyr Stephen) - but is rescued by his disciples and so able to continue his work of evangelisation, returning to his base in Antioch to receive the praise of the brethren

Second Reading: Apocalypse 21:1-5 - John's vision of the New Jerusalem represents the culmination of the act of Redemption. The curious detail about the disappearance of the sea can be understood but in Judaic symbolism the sea was the abode of the dragon (think of the "whale" in the Jonah story) and therefore a source of evil. The final enemy, death has been conquered and everything to do with the imperfect world has been wiped out. This is God's Re-Creation.

Gospel: John 13:31-35 - It may seem odd at this Easter time to return to the last discourse of Jesus in the Upper Room before his passion, but we can understand, in a way, how this passage is a foretaste of the vision we have just been reading about in the first two readings. The disciples, and therefore we too, are to love one another, not just as neighbours, but in the same manner as Jesus has loved them. A tall order, you might say: difficult enough to love the next-door neighbour, and how about the victims of earthquake half a world away? It all depends on what you mean by love. Jesus' story about the Good Samaritan doesn't describe him as kissing the poor man on both cheeks: he recognises the victim as a person and his outreach is purely practical.

Sunday May 25th **SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

First Reading: Acts 15:1-2,22-29 - Paul's news that the pagans were turning to Jesus provoked the more conservative Christian community in Judaea into insisting that gentiles convert to Judaism as the condition of them joining the followers of Jesus. In an attempt to quieten the violent argument the decision was made to establish minimum conditions: the gentiles had to abstain from food which had formed part of pagan sacrifices (temple authorities routinely sold off surplus offerings), or that had not been drained of blood (the demand that meat must be Kosher - or Halal - was based on the belief that blood was the life force). It's not clear what was meant by irregular marriages: possibly marriages that would not be recognised as valid by Jewish people at that time. Thus, it was hoped, the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians could be established amicably.

Second Reading: Apocalypse 21:10-14, 22-23 - We conclude this selection of readings from the Book of Revelation with this vision of the New Jerusalem in which the Almighty and the Lamb are themselves the Temple. The gates – the means by which the faithful enter the city – are named for the twelve tribes of Israel, and the city walls are set on foundations that bear the names of the Apostles. Thus, the promise of the Old Testament and the witness of the New are both fulfilled in the final triumph and reign of God.

Gospel: John 14:23-29 - We continue the reading from the Last Supper discourse. Notice the repeated emphasis on the "Word". In the context of Scripture "word" is life-giving. We are reminded not only of the beginning of John's Gospel – *In the beginning was the Word* – but of God's creative Word in the opening verses of Genesis. Here it is the disciple's faithfulness to the word that brings about the divine in-dwelling which itself results a peace that is deeper than anything the world can offer.

Thursday 29th **THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD**

*We celebrate the conclusion of Jesus' earthly mission. But how to express this in an understandable way? In ancient times it was comparatively simple. Creation consisted of three layers: on top you had Heaven, "God's place", in the middle you had our familiar Earth and the lowest level, the Underworld, was the realm of departed spirits. Although our understanding of the universe has and still is evolving, our religious language still retains much this ancient way of thinking. We talk about the Word Incarnate **coming down** from heaven and Jesus **going back up** to heaven. The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles treat of Jesus after his Resurrection in different ways. Mark has the women going to the tomb to be told he is not there; he will meet his disciples in Galilee. Such an ending was found so unsatisfactory to later readers that an extra chapter was added. Matthew ends with a meeting in Galilee: no mention of an ascension but a command to go out and spread the Good News. Luke has two versions: in his Gospel he merely says Jesus led them out of Jerusalem and there departed and was "carried up to Heaven." His later book - Acts of the Apostles - elaborates on this by describing a final forty days of instruction before his departure. John's Gospel has no reference to an Ascension. We keep today as a poetic expression of our belief that Jesus had left his earthly life and wants us to carry on his work.*

First Reading: Acts 1:1-11 - Even now, Luke suggests, after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples don't properly understand the mission of Jesus: they are still thinking in terms of an earthly kingdom. They need to be taught by means of a forty-day intensive course, and even at the end they still need to be reassured of the promise of the gift of God's Holy Spirit who will empower them to bear witness to the truth about Jesus to the whole world.

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:17-23 - Paul doesn't refer to any historic event returning Jesus to the heavenly realm, but he asserts the action of God the Father of Glory in raising him from the dead and making him to sit in glory at his right hand. The "names" Paul refers to are traditional Jewish names for the hierarchies of angels. The angels, he says, are God's messengers but the Christ who sits at the right hand of the Father is far above any angelic powers. And it is the community of believers who continues his earthly presence.

Gospel: Luke 24:46-55 - We return to Luke's original account of the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. Once again, note the importance of "witness". This is a simplified version of what we have seen elaborated already in today's first reading.