

## Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year C

This Sunday's readings continue the theme of the message of Jesus Christ spreading in parts of the Roman world through the agency of the apostles and their colleagues. At the same time it is good to keep in mind that Luke makes a particular point to emphasise the guidance and backing of the Holy Spirit who enables the whole movement to flourish.

**Acts 14:21-27** Just as Jesus himself realised he could not do his work alone but needed helpers, so the apostles worked in teams as they travelled around spreading the good news of the Lord. Luke presents Peter and Paul as the two outstanding missionaries in Acts, and in today's reading we get a glimpse of Paul and Barnabas in the middle of Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) visiting small communities of Christians and inspiring them with encouragement.

Notice how each community had a committee of elders who were appointed after a process of prayer and fasting that laid the foundation for authentic discernment. These procedures were not power structures but were ways of combining the wisdom of age and experience with the insights of the community to arrive at the appointment of worthy leaders. This allowed people like Paul and Barnabas to feel sure that they were leaving smaller communities well set up for self-governance.

At this stage there was no central church authority even though communities respected the position of the Jerusalem church that was led by James, the brother of the Lord, as Paul refers to him. These early Jesus followers referred to themselves as people of the way, that is, the way of wholesome living according to the teachings of Jesus. Each community was called an assembly or gathering, in Greek *ekklesia*, from which we get words like ecclesiastic. The Old English word for a place of Christian assembly was *kirike*, hence church – compare the Scots word kirk.

Paul and Barnabas sailed back from the southern shore of Turkey to Syrian Antioch to tell the Christians there of the spread of the good news of Christ in the provinces of Asia Minor. Luke uses this occasion to emphasise the guidance of the Spirit on these early missionary endeavours. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles Luke gives us a picture of dedicated service of the good news. The bringers of the word were men and women driven with fire in the belly to bring Christ to the wider Roman world.

**Psalms 144/145** The concept of the 'name' dominates this psalm. The 'name' describes the sacred reality represented by the letters YHWH which are unpronounceable and which encompass the One who causes existence to happen.

The focus in today's extract is on the divine attributes found in Exodus 34:5 where God is said to be gracious, compassionate, slow to anger and rich in unending love. Omitted from today's quotation is the encouraging line 'The Lord props up all who fall, and makes all who are bent stand erect.' This echoes a common motif in the Psalms in general, namely, the Lord is near to those who are crushed and who call on the Name.

**Revelation 21:1-5** This vision of the new heaven and the new earth is inspired by the vision of Second Isaiah (Isaiah 65:17) where the prophet is speaking for God declaring that a final judgement will occur when the righteous are rewarded and the ungodly are judged. The upright will be part of a whole new world order in which there is no suffering and no death. This is a repeated theme in Jewish apocalyptic literature and we see hints of it in the language of Jesus and in the Magnificat of Mary.

The new earth is not imagined to be some ethereal place but a renewal of the physical earth we are familiar with. The visions do not consider how the earth might contain all the human beings that have ever existed, but merely take it for granted that God will provide and make the new order happen. This completed reign of God will represent a total reversal of the hollow, self-serving and inadequate values that dominate human behaviour in so much of today's world.

John was writing in the last years of the first century and was intent on encouraging the Christian communities of his day to remain faithful to their commitment to Christ, to live out the recommendations of the Master and to endure whatever vilification and persecuting they might be called upon to endure.

None of this pretends to be a prediction of how the world will end or how evildoers will be punished and good people will be rewarded. It is visionary and therefore emerges from the interpretation of Scripture and the inspiration of a divine utopia that would follow a universal resurrection.

Contrary to what some creative and often wild interpreters of Revelation have guessed at, there is no hint that John envisaged a cosmic big bang or a cataclysmic destruction at the end of time. Such a 'final curtain' does not fit with the nature of a gracious and compassionate God. On the contrary. God is seen to be setting up a new creation that will amount to the ultimate paradise.

**John 13:31-35** The departure of Judas tells us that Jesus's hour has come at last. We recall his mention of the fact that his hour had not yet come when his mother put to him the problem of the wine disaster at the wedding of Cana. Again, in John 7:3-8 Jesus resisted the urging of his brothers to go to Jerusalem to broadcast his mission. He told them his hour had not come and chose to remain in Galilee.

But speaking to his friends at his last meal with them he indicated that his time had finally come to be glorified. If we interpret Jesus's words from a post-resurrection point of view we see that he is glorified through his suffering and death, which are the climax of the gift of himself.

Jesus addresses his friends as 'little children' (Greek *teknia*), which is a form of familiar address. It is family or kinship language highlighting connection between Jesus and his followers. It recalls the words of the Johannine prologue that those who receive the Word would have the power to become children of God (1:12).

### **The John writer stresses love as the signature legacy of Jesus**

The following verses can be read as the last will and testament of Jesus. He has no children who could be beneficiaries of his will and, what is more, he has no possessions to bequeath. His only legacy are his teachings and the memory of himself. From the Synoptic gospels we know that the Eucharistic meal was intended by Jesus to be a remembrance meal, an occasion when his followers would meet over the intimacy of sharing food and celebrate his memory and all that he stood for.

The John writer stresses love as the signature legacy of Jesus. He will be remembered by the love that his followers have for each other. It will not merely be an emotional love or attachment but a practical self-giving love that will express itself in willing service and profound respect for the other.

Jesus's instruction to love one another is not new in the sense that it is original or different from what is contained in traditional Jewish spirituality. It is already there in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is new because it completely governs the new order of the reign of God. Love is the basis of the relationship between Jesus and his followers. Remember the Good Shepherd language of John 10 where 'I know mine and mine know me' and where the love Jesus has is expressed in his preparedness to give his life for his own. Again, this is love delivered in the form of ready and enthusiastic service.



The way you begin to change the world is through service.

Martin Luther King Jr

To bring joy to one heart with love is better than a thousand litanies

Sufi saying



Which knight of the round table collected taxes?

*Sir Charge*

A prison inmate wrote his wife a letter.

'Don't plant the potatoes – that's where I left the money.'

He soon received a reply from his wife, 'They censored your letter and have dug up the entire backyard.'

He wrote back, 'Now you can plant the potatoes.'

*Laurie Woods*