

Sixth Sunday of Easter

The influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit stand out in today's readings. But this reality is not understood as some magical thing, like an idea popping into someone's head or a vision in the air. It is clear, particularly in the readings from the Acts of the Apostles and the gospel of John, that prayer and careful discernment are necessary parts of the process.

Acts 15:1-2, 22-29 This passage from Luke's second volume describes the Spirit's part in the resolution of a problem that surfaced among the earliest followers of Jesus. It is easy for us to forget that these men and women were Jewish and therefore committed to the laws and customs that had been handed down to them in the Mosaic tradition. The most actively traditionalist among them were insisting that new converts to the movement should observe the laws and practices of Judaism. After all, it was not the intention of Jesus to start a new religion. These traditionalists were most likely Pharisee-Christians who had been convinced by the teachings of Jesus. There is no doubt that the Jesus movement was continuous with Judaism.

Paul had a different view. He did not insist that gentile converts should be bound by Jewish laws. His priority was commitment to Christ and living the life and values that Christ recommended. Paul argued that the ritual laws and customs of Judaism did not apply to non-Jews and were certainly not necessary for salvation, that is, to be part of the reign of God.

Honest listening to the Spirit enabled leaders to reach balanced solutions

Today's extract shows how a solution to this problem was sought through consultation with Jacob (James), the leader of the Jerusalem community, and the group of elders that constituted a governing body. So the elders in Antioch sent a delegation to accompany Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. The reply from the 'apostles and elders' in Jerusalem was that male circumcision and other ritual practices of Judaism were not necessary for gentile converts. The elders only stipulated that non-Jewish members should refrain from giving approval to idol worship by refusing to eat food that had been offered to idols in the temples of other religions, and that they should avoid eating meat that had not been thoroughly bled and meat taken from strangled animals. These last two requirements are quite obviously kosher demands that regulate the proper slaughtering of animals according to Jewish law.

The final condition required the avoidance of improper sexual behaviour. This specifically relates to sexual union with family members who are within certain degrees of kinship. It does not directly apply to sex outside of marriage between unrelated individuals.

What comes through in this reading is the problem that arose between groups that had different views on human behaviour based on diverse cultural values. Paul was focused on core values that were linked to relationships that individuals had with God and their fellow humans. He saw the ritual customs of Judaism sitting outside core human values – fine for Jews but not essential for gentiles. It was the discernment process that involved honest listening to the Spirit that enabled the leaders to reach a fair solution.

The Lord is gracious and compassionate

Psalm 66/67 This is a psalm that acknowledges the graciousness of the Living Presence. Its international outlook indicates it may well have been written at the end of the Babylonian exile when the Judahites saw their freedom coming. This new perspective gave them an insight into their new vocation to make the graciousness of their Lord known in the world at large.

The attitude of this psalm is that the Lord is gracious and compassionate and governs with fairness and equity. The rest of the world needs to know about this.

Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23 This passage continues the vision of the elder, John of Patmos, in which he saw the representation of a new Jerusalem. This, of course, was a prefiguring of the new heaven and the new earth that constituted the ultimate reign of God. In the literature of antiquity high mountains were appropriate settings for revelations and visions. Moses climbing up Mt Sinai to encounter God is a perfect example. Notice John writes that he was taken up 'in the spirit'. His vision was not a preview of a future physical reality. It was a vision; part of a mystical experience.

The other issue we need to be aware of is the Jewishness of all the imagery in this vision. For a start, the holy city is Jerusalem, the walls had 12 gates with the name of one of the 12 tribes of Israel written over each gate. The angels on the gates were to keep out those opposed to God. The whole setup was modelled on the temple of Solomon, which had a large contingent of gatekeepers who made sure that only bona fide pilgrims were allowed inside. But this was not a temple, because the Living Presence and Christ the Lamb of God were the temple. They were the essence of holiness that made up the pinnacle of the heavenly scene.

We could well learn to see the world around us as the temple of the Living Presence. The natural world is sacred, as so many indigenous people have recognised in their story of living close to the land, sea and sky. Such people have based their traditions, life cycles and spirituality on their relationship with the mystical and the divine in their natural world.

John 14:23-29 Here is another extract from Jesus's lengthy discourse at this final meal with his friends. Throughout the gospel of John the writer has presented Jesus the Word as the location of God's presence in the human race. After Jesus goes, his followers will become a collective focus of the presence of God and the Son. The Holy Spirit will guide the new community and be a comforter in times of stress. The Spirit will enable the believers to recall the teachings of Jesus and live by them.

Peace is really a by-product of the way we live

When Jesus bequeaths peace it is not a gesture of trouble-free goodwill. We do well to remember that the root meaning of the Hebrew *shalom* is completeness, fullness, reaching potential, being finished and polished, matured with wholeness. Peace, as we popularly understand it, is really a by-product of the way we live. If we are maturing and growing to wholeness, we are on the road to genuine peace. If we do more listening than speaking, and daily reach out to give others a lift we are maturing in mind and spirit. We are then moving into the realm of peace and tranquillity. This is the peace Jesus is talking about and is not the kind of peace the world and the pursuit of trivia can bring.

Jesus's words are an encouragement for us to seek higher things and not be satisfied with passing fancies. Everything about him is enabling. He is giving us the confidence to realise we are enough to strive to achieve our potential. He is telling us we can do it when we are aware of the Spirit and set our goals and values in synch with his teaching. This assurance takes us along the pathway to authentic peace.



Jesus of the gospel of John takes us to a new level of consciousness, beyond the workings of our brain.



A group of kindergarten children was on a class outing to their local police station when they saw pictures on a bulletin board of the ten most-wanted men.

One of the youngsters pointed to a picture and asked if it was really the photo of a wanted person.

'Yes,' answered one of the officers.

'Well,' wondered the child, 'why didn't you keep him when you took his picture?'

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