

6th Sunday of Easter

Year C

‘The Radiant Glory Of God’.

*The Holy Spirit is the radiant glory of God that enlightens the Church
and guides it on its way through the world in all its decisions.*

(Acts 15: 1-2, 22-29; Rev.21: 10-14, 22-23; John 14: 23-29)

Most, if not all of us here, have at one time or another, endured those particularly cumbersome or dull events, such as painfully boring dinner parties. And those who have, will know there are occasions when the prospect of saying ‘goodbye’ to certain people can be a real pleasure. Of course, in extreme cases, there are even times when saying goodbye can feel like a truly blessed release. Saying goodbye to loved ones, on the other hand, is a very different matter indeed. Those goodbyes are invariably delayed, or deferred for as long as is humanly possible.

There are people for whom we care so deeply, people to whom we never want to say goodbye. And so, we put it off for as long as we can, at least until the last possible moment, when there is no choice. It is a simple fact of life that, in the presence of some people our whole life is uplifted and enhanced, whereas in the presence of others, we can find ourselves in deep, solemn prayer for escape!

On those sad occasions, when it is time to say farewell to someone we love, we find it a most difficult, and acutely painful wrench. And that is never truer than when someone we love is dying. Of our humanity, we mourn for them. Yet, more than mourning their death, we also mourn our loss. We find ourselves wondering how we are going to cope in the future, and what life will be like without them. We hope, and we pray, that they will live for ever, because we are far too afraid to even contemplate life without them, convinced that without them, our world would most surely collapse-in around us.

I am reminded of the words of Dylan Thomas as he pleaded with his father;

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

In today’s Gospel Jesus is aware of the deep anxiety of his disciples, as they face the reality of his departure. They are, who they are, because of him. And so, Jesus prepares them for the day of his going, just as today’s liturgy prepares us for the feast of the Ascension, which the Church celebrates next Thursday.

Before returning to his Father, Jesus counsels his disciples, not to be afraid. Go he must. But in his ‘Last Will & Testament’ he leaves them his word, and his peace, and the promise of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who will help them in the future to be his Apostles. Even so, in his Last Will Jesus did not leave his followers answers to every question in life. He knew that they would have to endure many struggles, and that they would have to face ambiguity and confusion, differences and even disagreements.

Jesus knew that they would not see eye to eye on everything, that they would have different memories of him, and that they would emphasise different things. In the conflicts that would arise, they would have to put their faith at work. That is why they would need the Advocate, the supreme lawyer! And as we sometimes need a lawyer when there is trouble, it wasn't too long before the Advocate was needed to settle conflict in the early Church.

During their year long mission in Antioch Barnabas and Paul had great success, receiving many Gentiles into the Christian faith. But their success gave rise to conflict in the Community, when members of the Jerusalem community argued that all converts first had to be circumcised, and obey the Law of Moses.

Now, Paul vigorously opposed this group, arguing that obedience to the 'Law' doesn't bring anyone salvation: that is only achieved through faith in Jesus Christ. However, those who argued that all Gentiles must obey the Law, had an influential lobby, and Paul tells us in his letter to the Galatians that they even influenced Peter:

'When Peter came to Antioch', he writes, 'I opposed him to his face since he was manifestly in the wrong... When I saw they were not respecting the true meaning of the Good News, I said to Peter in front of everyone, "In spite of being a Jew, you live like the pagans... So, you have no right to make the pagans copy Jewish ways!"' (Gal 2: 11ff)

You can almost feel the conflict in Paul's account of what happened. But, when Luke tells the story of the Council of Jerusalem, which was called to settle the question, he tidies up the conflict, and all we get is the resolution! On the other hand, Paul is clearly not embarrassed by having to argue his case openly, and he publicly opposes very powerful, well-respected members of the Church.

Paul puts his faith to work, and he argues for Christ. And it is largely through the Spirit working in him, that the Church spread so rapidly among the Gentiles. In short, Paul took Christ from within the precincts of the Jewish faith and introduced him to the pagan world. It follows then, that we should take heart from the conflicts of the early church because we know from experience that there will always be some conflict, some confusion, some disagreement in our complex and diverse community.

Not everything is perfectly, heavenly clear. And that is because we are imperfect, here on earth! That's why we need the Holy Spirit.

In the lives of all of us, we have to work through confusion, and aim for peace. We have to face new questions and new challenges, openly and honestly, and in the light of the Spirit. But we are neither alone nor helpless. We have the Word of God, and the presence of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to help us do what the Church must always do; face confusion and aim for peace.

And we can face the world with confidence because we have these divine gifts of grace. We have the Word of God, the presence of the Spirit, and apostles who struggle for the truth and freedom of the Gospel.