

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 15:7-21

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to the Apostles and the presbyters, "My brothers, you are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the Gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the Holy Spirit just as he did us. He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts. Why, then, are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they." The whole assembly fell silent, and they listened while Paul and Barnabas described the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them. After they had fallen silent, James responded, "My brothers, listen to me. Hymen has described how God first concerned himself with acquiring from among the Gentiles a people for his name. The words of the prophets agree with this, as is written: *After this I shall return and rebuild the fallen hut of David; from its ruins I shall rebuild it and raise it up again, so that the rest of humanity may seek out the Lord, even all the Gentiles on whom my name is invoked. Thus says the Lord who accomplishes these things, known from of old.* It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, but tell them by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. For Moses, for generations now, has had those who proclaim him in every town, as he has been read in the synagogues every sabbath."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 96:1-2a, 2b-3, 10

Proclaim God's marvelous deeds to all the nations.

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all you lands. Sing to the LORD; bless his name.

Proclaim God's marvelous deeds to all the nations.

Announce his salvation, day after day. Tell his glory among the nations; among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.

Proclaim God's marvelous deeds to all the nations.

Say among the nations: The LORD is king. He has made the world firm, not to be moved; he governs the peoples with equity.

Proclaim God's marvelous deeds to all the nations.

GOSPEL: John 15:9-11

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus said to his disciples: "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. "I have told you this so that my joy might be in you and your joy might be complete."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 5th Thursday of Easter

In the early days of the Church, Acts has told us that they were of one mind and heart. How long that lasted, we can't know. Chapter Fifteen of Acts told us of the true divisiveness that threatened to separate the Church for the first time in history. This has been a common theme that continues to this day. Today human hubris has separated Christ's Church into Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox churches. The problem then was of a mere practice, circumcision. The early Church was almost exclusively Jewish. Good, practical and faithful Jews also believed in Jesus as God's Anointed Son and, risen, the savior of the Human race. They were both Jewish and Christian at the same time. Such syncretic religious behavior is rare today for Christianity and Judaism parted ways to become separate world religions two millennia ago.

By the time of this event, most of the Jewish converts to Christ there ever were to be already were. More and more pagan Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus. Was there to be an outward sign of faith in Jesus? There is no physical, outward sign of one's inner faith. Those who believe give witness by what they say and do. Baptism is a ritual that uses outward signs, but oil and water evaporate and dry. They are evanescent as opposed to lasting. Male circumcision was permanent.

Salvation is the issue here. Faith in God, accepting and living God's covenant are the means of being saved in Judaism. Circumcision was the sign of initiation into the tribe of Abraham. For Jewish men, it is the outward sign of being Jewish, not of God's saving grace. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." (John 3:16 NAB) He also said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day." (John 6:44 NAB) Jesus also gave one command, "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13: 34-35 NAB) Love and faith are the only requirements and both are gifts we receive through God's amazing grace. The Holy Spirit led the Church to put these in action.

Any individual Christian's focus is never to be on how others have faith or how they love. It is to focus on our own faith and love. Judgment of others is always a sinner's option, of whom I am the first. It is also a trap for in it we act as judge in the place of God. Thus, by our attitude and actions, we are guilty of a greater sin, idolatry; God is the only judge. Since God is infinite, eternal and unconditional love, God always forgives sinners in compassion and mercy. God, in Jesus, became one like us, in all but sin, and knows, intimately what our lives and behavior will lead us. The Holy Spirit taught this to the Church and the Church acted on this too in its decision.

Their interpretation of Jesus words, the teaching of the love of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit has led the Church to this day and to us. Can we learn and then live these lessons as we follow our journey to God and God's Kingdom? How can we live our gift of life, faith and God's love today? God knows in our violent times, during a deadly pandemic and with people's opinions taken at the level of eternal, unchanging truth, Christian witness to faith and God's love is still a beacon of hope and peace. We can know God's presence in all people we meet whether we agree with them, like them or not. "I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20 NAB) These were Jesus parting words before ascending to his Father. This is a promise he made to us and the entire human race who may believe or not.

One and one equal two. We know this. We can count it on our fingers. Our experience has proved this to be a fact over and over again. We cannot say that we believe this to be true for we know its reality. True faith is not like this. How do we know that another truly loves us? We say we know it; but how? People can show us love; but can we know their true, intimate and inner experience? No, we can't for we're not the same person. We trust them based upon their behavior. Since we're really clever and complicated people, there can be other motives too. It's social science not math which with we deal.

How can we know that God loves us? Jesus did say so, but how can we be sure? We have life. We have faith. We experience love. These are all God's gifts. We also know forgiveness. We are full of God's gifts. Again we can trust what Jesus has said through our own experience. These gifts we have received, we can also share with those around us. When we do, we also verify their presence in our lives. Our behavior gives witness to God's gifts in our lives. It can never prove them. We still sin through deed or omission and show ourselves to be untrustworthy. Fortunately, God, being perfect, infinite, eternal, and unconditional when our actions reveal ourselves to be limited, finite and attached to ulterior motives, forgives our sins. We can rely on God in our lack. In God's grace we can try again.

What about complete joy? Is that only a thing we can know after death or within the fullness of the Kingdom of God? If so, Jesus made an empty promise and has led us into a trap. We can mistake joy with happiness. Happiness is an emotion that can come and go. Sometimes we are sad. Sometimes we grieve. We live amid a chaotic and deadly world where the news rarely shows respite. Again, is Jesus' promise the trap set by Carl Marx? A promise we can never know until we die? The nature of joy transcends our feelings. As believers, we live by faith and not by our feelings.

Joy is knowing the presence of God. We can know God's presence at any time, anywhere and with anyone. God is there when we sit vigil at a wake. God is with us when we are afraid, grieving and angry. This is part of Jesus promise which we glimpse, at times, in prayer, together with others and when we share a meal. I say this all the time; God is just a thought away. To remember God is God's gift. Since we remember God often, we experience joy in God's presence each time we do. When we remember those we love, what do we do? We also remember God for God is love.

Love is always the presence of God. Thinking and acting for others or the common good are the ways God enters the world, our lives and the lives of others. God does not change situations, institutions or environments; God first changes us. Our love and joy are signs of God being near.

May our faith, hope and love be signs of our trust.

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