

SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 26, 2019

First Reading – Acts of the Apostles 15:1-2;22-29

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 67

Second Reading – Revelation 21:10-14;22-23

Gospel – John 14:23-29

My dear people of God:

On this sixth Sunday of Easter, just a week before the Feast of the Ascension, we heard from our First Reading that *“some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers that unless they were circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, they would not be saved”*.

This unsolicited teaching (not advice) from hardline Jews (*who were not deputized to speak for and in the name of the Apostles*) sparked a huge controversy and debate within the Christian community of Antioch. Let us remember that Paul and Barnabas at this time were already considered the leaders of the community which was composed mostly of former pagans.

A decision was reached to send Paul, Barnabas, and some others up to Jerusalem to consult the Apostles and presbyters about this question: *“How should*

gentile converts become members of the Church”?

Please realize that what happened constituted the FIRST COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM. From Paul’s letter to the Galatians, chapter 2, we would learn that a Greek convert, named Titus (*presumably not circumcised*) was one of the members of the delegation (some others) to go to Jerusalem.

The delegation was well received in Jerusalem. Our first reading did not mention that it was the apostle James who spoke in the name of the Jerusalem Church. *{Now, councils and decisions are done in Rome}*. He made known the decision to welcome gentile converts and not to burden them with Jewish obligations. It is easy to assume that Jews, who were converts from Judaism, were still practicing circumcision as prescribed by Moses.

There were four conditions imposed on the gentile converts. These were the following:

(1) that they abstain from *pollutions of idols* - that is, eating “polluted food”. Polluted food is food that has been offered in sacrifice to idols. The gentiles/heathens were accustomed to eating this food. This condition was given to the gentile converts, lest it should seem to the Jews that they were not entirely weaned from idolatry.

(2) that they abstain from blood. In every form, blood was forbidden to be eaten by the Jews because blood

symbolized LIFE. This second condition is connected to the third.

Please know that these two(second and third) are well entrenched in the psyche of the Jews because Yahweh repeated this in several teachings:

(1) Leviticus 7:26 - You must not eat the blood of any bird or animal in any of your dwellings.

(2) Leviticus 7:27 - If anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from his people."

(3) Leviticus 17:10 - If anyone from the house of Israel or a foreigner living among them eats any blood, I will set My face against that person and cut him off from among his people.

(4) Leviticus 19:26 - You must not eat anything with blood still in it. You must not practice divination or sorcery.

(5) Deuteronomy 12:16 - but you must not eat the blood; pour it on the ground like water.

Now, let us go the third condition. This is connected with the second

(3) that they abstain from meat of strangled animals - which meant that the meat still had the blood in them because they were not slaughtered.

(4) that they abstain from fornication. Fornication was the “characteristic sin” of the gentiles/heathens; it was unashamedly practiced by all ranks and classes. It was not uncommon for pagans to indulge in sex (as part of their worship) right at the altar of their pagan gods. They had sex with vestal virgins who were in truth prostitutes. Hence any gentile convert who would indulge on it would be viewed by the Jews, as not ready to depart from paganism; hence is not ready to embrace the new religion.

Please allow me to bring you back to the first council. Paul has some recollection about this. It would be beneficial for us to read Paul’s personal recollection of this incident. He mentioned it in his letter to the Galatians in chapter 2: "*It was not until fourteen years had gone by that I traveled up to Jerusalem again, with Barnabas, and I took Titus with me too. My journey was inspired by a revelation and there, in a private session with the recognized leaders, I expounded the whole gospel that I preach to the gentiles, to make quite sure that the efforts I was making and had already made should not be fruitless. Even then, and although Titus, a Greek, was with me, there was no demand that he should be circumcised; but because of some false brothers who had secretly insinuated themselves to spy on the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, intending to reduce us to slavery; people we did not defer to for one moment, or the truth of the gospel preached to you might have been*

compromised, but those who were recognized as important people - whether they actually were important or not: there is no favoritism with God - those recognized leaders, I am saying, had nothing to add to my message. On the contrary, once they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been entrusted to me, just as to Peter the gospel for the circumcised (for he who empowered Peter's apostolate to the circumcision also empowered mine to the gentiles), and when they acknowledged the grace that had been given to me, then James and Cephas and John, who were the ones recognized as pillars, offered their right hands to Barnabas and to me as a sign of partnership: we were to go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked nothing more than that we should remember to help the poor, as indeed I was anxious to do in any case. This was Paul's third visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, and it was occasioned by the circumcision controversy. It might be easy for us to assume that our ways of bringing people to God are consistent with how God wants us to bring people to God.

My dear people of God, like the *“hardline advocates for circumcision”* in our first reading today, we might believe that we are doing God’s will and might need to impose “our certainty” to others in order to conserve and preserve pure God’s teachings. Yet, ironically God is not constrained by our “certainty”. He is the **ONLY ABSOLUTE**. He sends the Holy Spirit to lead us into all

truth, sometimes working hard to convince us that our actions hinder *rather than help* people find their way.

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles made that point: When the Sanhedrin wanted to execute Peter and the apostles, Gamaliel advised them to consider their actions carefully, lest they find themselves fighting against God (Acts 5:34-40). It is extremely important that we heed this advice from Gamaliel. Despite our honest intentions, we must not impede God's work. And what if we do not have honest intentions? I am afraid that thwarting God's plans can mean our condemnation.

We can safely conclude that the inclusion of the gentiles into the Church was willed by God Himself and was demonstrated by the fruits of Paul's missionary labors.

Now, let us go to the Second Reading. John in the Book of Revelation (in chapter 21, verses 10-14; and verses 22-23), gave us the ultimate goal to which God will bring the world.

John gave us a very detailed presentation of the same city that he had seen in verses 10 to 14, but more descriptions were given in verses 15 to 21 (which were not included in our second reading today).

John told us in verse 22 that there was no temple in the New Jerusalem, because God and the Lamb are the

temple in this city. John already told us about this city as the bride of the Lamb in verse 2.

It must have been very reassuring for the persecuted people during John's time to hear about this new city, about how they and God would live together in that intimate relationship. They will walk in the light of God's New Jerusalem. And the kings of the earth will bring their glory into Jerusalem, coming finally to proper worship.

It would be correct to say that there will be no need for security systems in this city: no bars on the windows, no locked doors, no alarms. The gates of the city will be open always. There will be no need to close the gates at night, because there is no night anyway, since God's own light shines in the city. Anyone can come as one wishes; none will feel insecure. All are welcome.

My dear people of God, let us prepare ourselves in order to live in this new city. But we have to start now.

And now, let us go to the Gospel. Please remember that we are still in the context of the Last Supper (that is prior to His departure from this world).

Last Sunday, we heard about the new commandment of Jesus: ***“Love one another as I have loved you”***.

Today, we hear the words of Jesus to His disciples. These were reassuring words. They will not be left alone because the Holy Spirit was promised to them.

He made them realize that loving Him meant obeying His teachings (verse 23). And if they obeyed Him, the ***“Father will love them, and the Father and He (Son) will come to them and make their home with them”*** (verse 23).

I want you my brothers and sisters to realize what an astonishing promise of Divine Presence Jesus gave. Jesus promised them that they will not be alone. Into this reality of impending absence, comes the Spirit, the Advocate, sent by God in Jesus' name to be present with the followers of Jesus (verse 26).

Jesus introduced to them for the first time the existence of the Holy Spirit - the Advocate. He, the Holy Spirit was to be ***“a presence which the disciples would need in order to love as they are called to love: a presence which would assure them of Jesus' presence as if He is still with them. And the Holy Spirit will serve as their Teacher in Jesus' absence (verse 26).***

Interestingly, the next reassuring promise was not even a promise. It was an instant gift: His Peace. Verse 27 beautifully said it: ***“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”***

Yes, my dear brothers and sisters: This is not a passive peace; it is active. The Holy Spirit would propel the disciples (and later, us the Church), into active discipleship and mission. It is with the presence of this peace, given by God in Jesus' name, which enables the disciples and all of us to live lives of faithfulness (verse 26).

In this context, we can rightly imagine that peace is not something the disciples were feeling. Since they have walked with Jesus as He healed, taught, and changed the world, now they understood that in His impending absence He left them what they needed in order to continue His work.

And the reward would be great: they would rejoice that Jesus is going back to the Father. There must be heaven.

Yes, my dear people of God. There is heaven. So, let us live in peace; which means that we must live our missionary calling by actively leading people to heaven because the Holy Spirit will assist us. Amen.