

6th Sunday of Easter

Fr. Samuel Springuel

26 May, 2019

1st Reading Acts 15:1–2,22–29

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 67:2–3,5,6,8

2nd Reading Revelation 21:10–14,22–23

Gospel John 14:23–29

Easter is such an important time that we dedicate seven weeks to celebrating it properly. A whole 50 days from Easter to Pentecost; it's a time period which corresponds to the account of the events in Luke's Gospel and Acts. But there isn't really enough biblical material about that time period for our readings to stay within it. Take today's readings for example. Our first reading is talking about events which took place some 18 years after the Resurrection and Pentecost. We heard about some of the growing pains of the young Church as it struggled to define itself and work through all the implications of the Crucified and Risen Messiah. The second reading paints the picture of the end times: the holy city Jerusalem descending from heaven, made new and perfected as the shining beacon of the redeemed world. Written some 50-odd years after the Resurrection, it seeks to reassure a community struggling under persecution that the victory of Christ has already been won and that their current difficulties are only a minor inconvenience on the road to the fulfillment of that victory. And then there's the Gospel. Extracted from the prolonged instruction that Jesus gives the disciples at the Last Supper, we heard Jesus say he was going away, but that he would send an Advocate to be with us.

It's all quite a mix of things, written at various times, and talking about even more various times. One might be tempted to say that the Lectionary is getting a little short of "Easter" material in pulling these accounts together. That impression, however, I think comes because the readings are in the wrong order. To really get the sense of what is being said, we need to start with the Gospel, then read the first reading, and then finally the second.

In the Gospel, Jesus is telling the apostles that he will be going away, but that he will be back. Earlier in the speech, in a part not included in today's Gospel, Jesus characterized this "going away" as for "a little while." Knowing what comes next, we are tempted to say that Jesus is talking about his impending death. When he dies he will "go away" for three days, "a little while." After that, he comes back, he rises from the dead and the apostles once again see him in the various post-Resurrection encounters we heard earlier in the Easter season. This isn't quite right, however, as the middle passage about the Advocate indicates. Jesus tells the apostles that while he is away he will send them an Advocate to be with them and remind them of him and his teachings. This Advocate is the Holy Spirit, who wasn't sent until Pentecost; not immediately after Jesus's

death, but after his Resurrection and Ascension. We are in the midst, then, of Jesus's "little while." Jesus has gone away, ascended to the Father, and we are waiting for him to come back. While we wait, we have the Holy Spirit with us to accompany us and help us stay true to Jesus's teachings.

As evidence of that, we look to the first reading, where the Church is struggling with its identity. Is it a Jewish movement or something else? All of Jesus's early followers were Jews. Jesus himself was a Jew. He taught that he came not to abolish the *law*, Torah, but to fulfill it. "Not one iota, not one jot of the law will pass away until all is fulfilled." Jesus was the *Messiah*, the one announced by the Prophets, the *Jewish* Prophets. His coming was the fulfillment of everything that had been promised to *Israel*. By strictly human precedent, the followers of Christ should be Jews. But there's that line from the Gospel: "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." And then there are those odd incidents where Jesus finds faith outside of Israel: the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter was ill, the Roman centurion with a sick servant, the Samaritan woman at the well. These were not Jews, and yet Jesus commended them for their faith. And what about the experience of the Apostles themselves: Peter with Cornelius, Paul and Barnabas on their mission in Cyprus, Pisidia, Iconium, and Lystra. Gentiles were proving to be more receptive to the message of Jesus than anyone could have expected and when they came to believe *they received the Holy Spirit*. Jesus had promised to send an Advocate to *remind his followers* of his teaching. If the Gentiles were receiving the Holy Spirit, were receiving the Advocate, then they too must be followers of Jesus. The Council of Jerusalem realized that the Holy Spirit was leading the Christian Way beyond the limits of its Jewish roots and they could only follow. That's why their letter first says, "It is the decision of the Holy Spirit." The "and of us" is almost an afterthought.

But of course the Church is not done growing yet; not at the Council of Jerusalem and not even today. The second reading points to the future coming of Christ. The holy city, perfected and gleaming, descends from heaven. There is no need for temple or lamp, symbols of God's presence and glory, because in this perfected city He is really, actually, almost physically present. Symbol, representation, sacrament, these things will fall away to reveal the reality they represent and make present to us today. Jerusalem, our Jewish roots, are polished up, perfected, revealed as the beacon to all the nations. This is what we proclaimed in the psalm. God's ways will be known over *all* the earth and *all* the nations will praise God as a result.

Today's readings are no mishmash. They are a reminder of where we have been, and where we are going. We cannot afford to forget either, because both are essential to our present.