**FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

**8th May 2022**

**First Reading Acts 13:14.43-52**

Acts shows us the Christian community in the first years after the Easter events, and thus reveals the impact of the resurrection experiences on the apostolic Church.

Today's reading tells of the preaching of Paul and Barnabas in what is now Central Turkey during the so-called first missionary journey. (47/48 A.D.) A clear pattern already emerges. Paul preaches first to Jews, the chosen people when he initially attends their synagogues as a visitor. He presents the crucified Jesus as the Messiah. The suggestion appears blasphemous and unsurprisingly, they mostly reject him. He turns to the Gentiles. The pattern is repeated in chapters 18 and 28 and it worried the converts as to why the Jews rejected Paul’s preaching. Of course, the message was not easy. It was controversial. It was a challenge and it was challenged.

It was a structural plank of the preaching that the coming of the Messiah was planned by God who had covertly lodged hints in the Jewish scriptures. So, how is it that the Jews did not welcome him and was their rejection foreshadowed too?

The point being made is that the inexplicable refusal of many to respond still falls into place in God's plan. It is a rather tortuous answer to the question: Why is it that the Jewish people, by and large, did not acknowledge their Messiah? The simple answer: God knows! We do not.

The proclamation of the word of God has no guaranteed success, but the word must be proclaimed anyway whether people hear or refuse to hear (Ezekiel 3:5). What matters is that the word is proclaimed faithfully. This matters even more than that it should be relevant or successful.

**Responsorial Psalm: 100:1-3, 5**

Easter is pre-eminently the season of joy. (Note also the last sentence of the first reading and the joyful tone of the hymn in the second reading.) Easter joy (Jubilate) is not the joy of anticipation like that of Advent (Gaudete), nor the brief moment of relief like the joy of mid-Lent (Laetare), but the exuberance of sorrow that has been turned into joy (from the old gospel for this day John 16:20-22).

**Second Reading Revelation 7:9 & 14-17**

It is impossible to understand this reading without knowing what immediately precedes it. In his imagination, John is in heaven and watches those who have been admitted. Firstly (7;4-8) we have 12,000 from each of the historic twelve Jewish tribes. 12,000 is a conventional number indicating completeness. By using a huge round number, what John is saying is that after all the Jews who are destined for heaven are safely in, then those from other peoples will be admitted.

Our reading to-day picks up from this point with an innumerable crowd of Gentiles. This second group is incalculable because it is not yet complete. It was still being added to on a daily basis. More particularly, for John, these are the Christian martyrs who are first in the ranking of all Christians.

In keeping with his consistent outlook they are presented as supremely happy; they stand before God and the Lamb, celebrating a heavenly Feast of Tabernacles.

(Tabernacles was the most joyous of Hebrew feasts when whole Jewish families decamped into the fields in tents until the harvesting was complete. It appears to be the feast John has in mind when he says that the ‘*One who sits on the throne spreads his tent over them*’ Also, the Greek word for ‘tent’ sounded like the Hebrew word for ‘glory’)

The white robes and palms were signs of conquest and victory, on the battlefield, in victory processions, in the ‘games’ and now in the arena. These signs are now awarded to the martyrs who are the first of all faithful Christians and in their priestly role (1:6) they serve God, adding their human voice to the prayer of creation (4:8). In their Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:33-36) there is no need for the martyrs to erect their own tents. God himself will be their shelter and their glory. (see Revelation 21:3).

**Gospel John 10:27-30**

Shepherds were a common sight in the middle-east and provided Jesus with many opportunities to illustrate his teaching on different subjects. Therefore the same elements of shepherding have different meanings in each instance and we must treat each separately.

In today’s passage, John portrays Jesus’ relation to his followers as similar to that of a shepherd to his sheep. They recognise his voice. They have his protection. They cannot be lost. They have been given him by the Father with whom he has a perfect unity.

The message is that Christians live within the world as flocks of sheep mix together. Their close neighbours or even family may not be Christians but those who are must never forget it. Either at night in the sheepfold or on the stony hillside during the day, they mingle randomly with other sheep. But at the sound of the voice of ‘their’ shepherd, they will leave the others and follow the one they trust. So it is with Christians as they are called out of this world by their shepherd.

There are two deductions we can draw from this picture. One is that it is impossible for Christians to form a pure and sinless community as has sometimes been tried in the past. We must continue to live in close proximity to non-Christians, while remembering our ultimate loyalties.

The second deduction assumes that there are those who will not respond. This was borne out for John’s readers by the unimaginative Jews and the ignorant Gentiles. But, the ‘huge number’ of the second reading are those who have recognised and responded to the voice of the shepherd in the Gospel.

The vocabulary, grammar and themes of this extract are stated in typically Johannine language. Yet it also correctly reproduces the teaching of the earthly Jesus as it was recorded in the Synoptists thirty years earlier.

To hear, to recognise and to respond to Jesus' word on earth is the decisive factor that will determine acceptance by God at the last judgment (see Luke 12:8-9). It has obviously not been clear to the Jewish leaders whether Jesus was really the Messiah, and he clearly is not going to make it easy for them (8;25-30). His followers however know, by his voice, and they cannot be lost. By their simple affirmation they are wiser than the better educated and have priority over the more important.

And the last line concerning Jesus’ claim about his unity with his Father gives the basis for the Nicene Creed of 325 A.D. but neither Jesus nor John could hardly have been aware of all the lengthy discussions that lay ahead, which would culminate in that dogmatic formula. For John, at the conclusion of the Apostolic age, the Father and the Son are one simply because of the Father's call of the Son and the Son’s response through the life of the historical Jesus.

John’s Gospel is a carefully constructed work. It begins with the claim of Jesus’ divine authority (1;14) and concludes with Thomas’ testimony to it (20;28-31). The intervening record is a complete harmony of the words of the Father and the deeds of the Son, and the result of this is what we call ‘John’s Gospel’