**FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

***The New Creation***

**15th May 2022**

**First Reading Acts 14:21-27**

This passage is the conclusion of what is commonly called 'the first missionary journey' (Acts 13:14). It took place about 47 to 48 A.D. Paul and Barnabas are retracing their steps encouraging the little congregations of Christians they had founded on their outward journey. They leave them under no illusion: they will have to prepare for hostility. There were two towns called ‘Antioch’ in The New Testament. This one was in Psidia in modern central Turkey which was one of the towns on their itinerary. The other was the base in northern Syria from which they had set out and which was then the strongest centre of Christianity in the world. It features in next week’s episode.

Of special interest is the appointment of elders in each church. The word used is *Presbyteros* which means ‘an old man’ and he would have been the head of the family in the household where the church met. He would have presided at the Eucharistic meal in his own home as he presided at all other meals and it is interesting to note the casual tone Luke uses here. It seems to be already an established and recognised office even at this early date. The word was later abbreviated to ‘priest’ and also gives us Presbyterian and Presbytery.

Paul may sometimes have appointed prominent community leaders, but his own authority remained paramount (see the tone in 1 Corinthians 7:1 ff and 2 Corinthians 11:28). The appointment here takes place only after prayer and fasting and was usually formalised by extending the hands over the candidate. (Acts 13;3) This ritual was inherited directly from Judaism (Numbers 8;10-11) but note that Luke, in Gospel and Acts, stresses the importance of the prayer (and fasting) that accompanied it.

When the apostles return to the church in the Syrian Antioch, they report, not what they had done, but what "God had done with them." It was he, not their own missionary strategy, that had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

**Responsorial Psalm: 145:8-13b**

This is another psalm of exuberant joy. The psalmist exults in God's mighty acts in creation and in salvation history. In the earlier part of the Old Testament, the kingdom of God is a cause for rejoicing, but later disasters had befallen his people, and, the hope was that God would eventually establish it again. The New Testament message is that this has now happened—by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

**Second Reading Revelation of John 21:1-5**

The closing part of Revelation opens with the vision of a new heaven and a new earth, the setting of the new Jerusalem. The former creation has passed away (20:11) and all evil has been destroyed; now is the first phase of God's plan. The structure of Revelation 21:1-2 is modelled on Isaiah 65:17-19 (for that text see below) the appearance of a new world, the disappearance of the former things, and the emergence of a new Jerusalem.

*“See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.*

The new Jerusalem is a heavenly city, a city 'whose builder and maker is God' (Hebrews 11:10; 12:22; Galatians 4:26). Jerusalem was understood to represent the Jewish people. The old city of Jerusalem had been destroyed c. 25 years before and put under an interdict. To speak of a new Jerusalem was to proclaim a new people and a new covenant. The twofold images of 'city' and 'bride' were traditional; in this chapter John combines them.

In the new Jerusalem sorrow and pain will have no place; the positive defeat of the satanic forces, graphically described from 19:11 to 20:10, has brought to an end all that made up a world of sin. It may be helpful for us to remember that what John was trying to do was to speak about things beyond human understanding in language that his readers could understand. We are at one further remove in that we have to first of all understand what that was and our partial knowledge makes it more difficult.

What, for example is eternity? And, what did his readers think it was? Did they identify it with endlessness? What is eternal life with God? We, in our earthly existence, creatures of time and space, must perforce picture heavenly reality in inadequate language. Here, John has the same problem and his attempt to speak of it is that there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

The dragon once had his place in the old heaven; he had ravaged the old earth. A creation that is, at last, utterly free of evil can only be new. Humanity was the summit of God's creation, his pride and joy (Genesis 1:26-31). His destined home for humanity was the garden of delights (2:15). There will a new home for Christians in the new creation: a city, the city of God, the new Jerusalem. It is a heavenly city, yet a home of men and women.

**Gospel John 13:31-35**

Chapters 13 to 17 of John’s Gospel occupy the place, which in the Synoptics is occupied by the account of the Last Supper and institution of the Eucharist. Thus the Eucharist becomes the setting for the subjects mentioned here. This extract comes after the washing of the disciples' feet, the instruction on discipleship, and the prophecy of the betrayal. It is important to note that Judas Iscariot has left. He is not present at the heart of the Eucharist, as visitors and catechumens are still expelled just before the long Eucharistic prayer in the Orthodox Rite to-day. Jesus is alone with his own. Though the Eucharist is never explicitly mentioned, is implied throughout.

Like Revelation, it is also a confusing passage. There are five uses of the word ‘glory’ (Greek - doxa), which is one of the themes which run through the whole of John’s Gospel. The first three are in the past tense of a completed action and they all refer to the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension but as one event. The last two are in the future tense and refer to the Parousia and Judgement. So the passage was an anticipation of the future while looking back at the events of the past.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament Doxa translates 25 different Hebrew words which compounds our confusion. The common idea behind many of them is that of ‘gravity’ in the sense of great importance. The English translation is frequently ‘glory’ but this word has an imprecise meaning in many minds. Its importance can be seen in New Testament instances of impressive appearances such as that of Solomon (eg; Matthew 6;29) and the Transfiguration (Luke 9;31-32).

For John, Doxa is supremely present in the Incarnation (1;14) can be seen at work in the ‘signs’ (2;11) and associated with the Son of Man and especially on the Cross. It is possible that the passage formed an early Christian hymn which celebrated the enthronement of Christ as Son of Man at his exaltation and looked forward to his return in glory.

It is well-known that the Synoptic writers (Matthew, Mark and Luke) tell us that Jesus established what became the Eucharist at the last meal he had with his disciples. They also claim that this happened to be the Passover meal for that year.

Yet it is also the fact that John not only does not mention any such meal but even places the Crucifixion just before the Passover meal is due. The differences are perfectly understandable, but the passage from to-day’s Gospel reading is in the place of such a meal in John’s scheme. It is not explicit because it was not written for non-Christians and every Christian reader would have understood the implication anyway.

The Eucharist and the ‘agape’ meal were closely associated at first before gradually becoming distinct, but the heart of the latter was an intense bond between the diners. This was a practice among other social groups at the time and only declined among Christians because the growth of the Church made the meals impractical. This inward looking sense seems to be the one John is using here rather than that love for one’s enemy which had marked Jesus’ teaching (Matthew 5;43-48).

It is easy to criticize John's concept of love for being more restricted and weaker than that of the Sermon on the Mount. At the same time, amongst ourselves it is easy to understand an inevitable difference between the strength of our love for a fellow Christian and that for one who is indifferent to what we rate as vital. Even a fellow Christian is sometimes hard going and love for someone with whom we have little in common even more so. And, as such the Christian readers of John’s Gospel were no better than us. It is a mistake to regard them, or even the Apostles themselves as being on a superior moral plane to us. The difference between us simply illustrates how far we all are from what is required.

Love for others does not come easily even for those who are easy to love. One cannot love as Jesus has loved, one cannot give oneself as Peter proposes to do, without outside help. There are barricades which make love inaccessible, and so, before speaking of it, before issuing the invitation, Jesus refers to his own going away (v. 33), to what is, in fact, a mission to overleap the barricades.

Through his departure in death he will release a stream of spiritual life which, while sweeping away all obstacles, will impart a new life, a new power of loving. So the members of his body become conduits of his love for the world.