**SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER**

**22nd May 2022**

***The Radiant Glory of God***

**First Reading Acts 15:1-2 & 22-29**

This Jerusalem meeting (ca. 49 AD) was a decisive moment for the history of Christianity. Paul and Barnabas had just returned to their base, Antioch in Syria, having established a number of new Christian congregations in Asia Minor which was, of course, of a Greek culture. Some converts had been Jewish and some Gentile and the older Church in Jerusalem felt concerned that some of the new members might not appreciate the honour it was to belong.

Gentile converts had up to this point come through Judaism. For example Peter had so received Cornelius and his household. They had ‘received the Holy Spirit’ (i.e. glossolalia) and Baptism (Acts 10.23-48) which had been accepted by the Jerusalem Church (Acts 11;18) But these new converts also included pagan Gentiles.

These Gentile converts must first become good Jews: 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses' (v. 5; see vv. 1-2). If this view had prevailed, Christianity could never be more than a Jewish sect. The momentous decision at Jerusalem determined that it would become a universal religion. Acts 15 is Luke's version of the episode; we have Paul's account in Galatians 2.

Peter brought forward the precedent of Cornelius: it would be 'putting God to the test' to impose any burdens on the converts since he had made his will known so clearly. It was by the grace of the Lord Jesus alone that Jews and Gentiles were saved (15:7-11). James, the Lord’s brother, also (Acts15;13-21) concurred over circumcision, though he retained the restrictions on marriage and dietary customs. (It is possible that Christian Baptism was seen as the equivalent of Jewish circumcision.)

This was probably to enable Jewish and Gentile Christians to associate and eat together without any embarrassment. It is very likely that this guidance by James was a compromise following the disagreement between Paul and Peter. (Galatians 2:11-14)

What is more important for us is to realise that the authority of the mother-Church was invoked to settle a problem that had troubled the Church in Antioch which had imperilled the future of Christianity. The local congregation did not have the right to make its own decision but accepted the ruling from above.

Secondly, we must notice that the decision was arrived after discussion in the Holy Spirit. Consultation and prayer were the means of discerning the will of God.

**Second Reading Revelation to John 21:10-14 & 22-23**

The last chapter of Revelation climaxes with a majestic view of the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Church of the future, the true kingdom of God. The starting point for John's picture of the new Jerusalem is Ezekiel's vision of the Messianic city. (Ezekiel 40-48). But, it is the difference rather than the similarities that is most important.

Ezekiel was in Babylonian exile but from there devoted nine chapters of his book to describe a new Jerusalem with a rebuilt Temple. In Judaism, Hinduism and the ancient Roman world a Temple is where God lives.

From Solomon’s Temple to that of Herod in the time of Jesus, it is no surprise that all traditions assumed a great, impressive building as the centrepiece of YHWH's new creation. (Apart from Ezekiel mentioned above see Psalms 24 & 84; Exodus 15;17-18 Isaiah 66;20; 1 Enoch 90;28-29; Job 1;27-28; and the Temple Scroll of Qumran)

So it is a great surprise that John pointedly makes it quite clear that in the new Jerusalem there is no Temple. The City is built on the twelve Apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel making clear the continuity of Christianity with Judaism.

This implies a visible and organic body being common to both. The difference is the absence of a Temple because in the new order, God and the Lamb occupy the whole city instead of one building.

This is reminiscent of 7:15 where God himself is the tent of the heavenly feast of Tabernacles, for the liturgy of that feast appears to underlie our passage. A nightly ceremony with bright lights and rejoicing was a feature of Tabernacles.

In the new city the Lamb will provide the light by night and God will replace the sun by day. God is not hidden away in the private Holy of Holies as he was in the temple of old but present in every part.

There is of course a correspondence between this holy city and the Church on earth. The Church is the Body of Christ and its members are the stones of the new city. So God and The Lamb are present wherever the Church meets.

The Church, too, has a radiance—not the splendour of a worldly power (though it has often masqueraded as such since the time of Constantine, but the radiance of the word and sacraments and the presence of the Spirit.

**Gospel John 14:23-29**

The Crucifixion and Resurrection should be thought of as one event, as if two sides of a coin. As one event it divides time into two epochs. Jesus’ monologue reported in the gospel reading for to-day is set just before the division, but written afterwards.

So, as we read, we do so conscious of details illuminated by what we know happened later. We can only understand Jesus, his teaching, his sacrifice, his person in the knowledge of what happened at Easter. The concluding words of the Gospel reading *I have told you this now, before it happens so that when it does happen, you may believe* invite us to recall his earlier words.

With this approach we can identify three important details from to-day’s reading. One is to expect the Holy Spirit, the second is to receive the otherworldly Peace and the third is to anticipate the return of Christ himself.

Despite his going away he and they will not be apart: they will be drawn into the love of the Father and Son. To love Jesus is to 'keep his word', that is, to respond in all their life to the challenge of Jesus. If this be the case, then *'my Father will love them, and we will come to them and will make our home with them*.' This is a personal coming of the Father in the Son. Besides, the word of Jesus - his revelation - also abides with them.

There is another sense in which they will not be alone: the Holy Spirit will replace Jesus and carry on his work (vv. 25-26). In union with Jesus (*'in my name'*) he will teach. But his teaching will relate to the words of Jesus, leading the disciples into a fuller understanding of what Jesus revealed and taught; he is the interpreter of Jesus to his disciples. (15;26) The teaching of Jesus is not systematic but fragmentary and we have a vital contribution to relate it to our world.

This teaching was to be found in the four Canonical Gospels. The Canon was the list of writings that the Church approved as being reliable. It was vital to exclude the dozens of late sensational fantasies that had appeared. Communication within the Empire was slow and so the Dioceses’ lists did not always agree but gradually our present Canon evolved.

With the completion of the Canon of Scripture (200-400 A.D.) all revelation was assumed to be complete. (In 1768, when the Encyclopaedia Britannica was published, it was claimed that there could be no more knowledge to be discovered. The same happened with the fixing of the Qu’ran after Mohammed’s death).

But surely human understanding can never be complete. It is a fact that we have to make moral judgements in situations unimaginable to the Biblical authors and guidance from the Holy Spirit is something that would be of incalculable benefit. And John reports Jesus as saying that the Holy Spirit would ‘guide the Church into all truth’ (16;13-15) which implies no limit to learning.

On the other hand it is also clearly the case that the Church (in all its various traditions) has frequently been wrong, or considered to have been wrong by later generations! So the promise of Jesus is not automatic and the conclusions he expects us to draw from the Holy Spirit’s guidance are far from obvious, but he still requires responsible decisions from his members.

Only through the power of the Spirit can we come to understand the real meaning of Jesus' person and mission of salvation. But the Spirit, who knows the depths of God, teaches us and enables us to say *'Jesus is Lord*.' As the Spirit of God inspires our membership of the Body of Christ, we share in the privileges and responsibilities of that unique community gathered together in his name