

Homily for May 9, 2010

The first reading and the Gospel for this sixth Sunday of Easter provide us with a sense of security and a model for responding to the changes that inevitably come with time. They serve as a guide and as reassurance so that we can move with the Spirit of God. As I read them with, of course, the consciousness that this is also Mothers' Day, I kept thinking of a statement my wife, Ruth, used to make about bringing up children: we bring children into the world, she said, to leave home. Thus it was our responsibility to prepare them to do so. The first reading and the Gospel tell us how Jesus and the early Church addressed change and thus helped the Apostles, the early Christians and, by extension, us to move beyond the comfort of the past to the uncertainty of the future.

The Gospel reading is part of Jesus' farewell discourse at the Last Supper. Jesus is preparing his apostles for the great unknown when he would no longer be with them in person. If you will, he is about to shove them out of the nest where he has nurtured and taught them. The thought of his leaving frightened them obviously or he would not have said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid."

But he made them a promise:

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. . . . I am going away and I will come back to you."

A short time later, of course, Jesus was arrested, was crucified, died, and was buried, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sent the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, at Pentecost, as he promised.

After Pentecost, however, there was not unanimous agreement among Jesus' followers as our first reading for today shows us. Some of the followers of Jesus, disciples, from among the Pharisees were absolutely convinced that a person had to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law in order to be saved; that is, any non-Jew who wished to become a Christian, first, had to become a Jew. That is the basis for the statement in today's reading: "Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved." In their understanding this is the way it had always been, and obviously they

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could not imagine this process could be changed. Thus, there was a confrontation between them on the one side and Paul and Barnabas on the other.

Our first reading is abridged, and so the process of discernment to resolve the dispute is more complex than our reading conveys. The process goes like this: some of the members from the Church at Antioch went with Paul and Barnabas to consult with the apostles and priests at the Mother Church in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas gave a report, the Pharisaic Christians gave a rebuttal and, as Acts tells us, “after much debate,” Peter spoke in support of Paul and Barnabas, they themselves spoke again, and then James, the leader of the Jerusalem community, quoting from the Prophet Amos, gave his judgment. A letter and representatives were then sent to Antioch from the church in Jerusalem, as our first reading tells us. You may notice that the only requirements for the Gentiles are that, out of consideration for Jewish sensitivities, they are to avoid inappropriately sacrificed animals, to avoid consuming blood, to avoid consuming animals slaughtered without draining the blood and strangled animals for the same reason, and marriages within certain degrees of kinship. We immediately recognize that all these requirements will not remain a part of church teaching. More changes were to come.

It is easy for us to feel superior and even judgmental towards the Pharisaic Christians, but some among us can recall how confused and afraid and hurt some people were after Vatican II, and as you may know, there are still those who have not accepted the changes. We are about to face a change ourselves: A new translation of the mass parts is going to be introduced within the next two years. At that time many of us may better understand the resistance within the early Church and after Vatican II. Even more immediate, with fewer priests and more people worshiping, changes are occurring in the Church and more must occur within the parish.

But I want to call your attention to the process of discernment used by the early Christians (Remember that our reading is abridged). Through careful and respectful hearing on all sides, careful attention to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a reflection on the tradition that considered all the Scripture, not just that which supported one view, prayer, respectful debate and discussion—by this process the first Christians arrived at a solution that allowed the message of Christ to be spread abroad in peace. Changes have

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come and more are yet to come. May we learn from the experience of the infant church and remember the words of Jesus: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.” Amen, Lord Jesus.

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