

Father O'Connor's Homily for 25 May 2025  
Sixth Sunday of Easter-C

Acts of the Apostles 15: 1-2, 22-29  
Revelation 21: 10-14, 22-23  
John 14: 23-29

I am wondering if your imagination captured the scene and the emotions in today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Just in case they escaped you, I invite you to work with me now as I attempt to re-stage them for us. Because something very important happened there that affects us today.

The most epoch-making things were happening in Antioch in the days of Saint Peter and Saint Paul. The Gospel was being preached to Jew and Gentile alike, and they were living together as brothers and sisters.

But there were certain Jewish Christians who found this to be unthinkable. After all, they were "the chosen people." The Gentile Christians might be allowed to come into the Church, but only if they first became Jews. [If this attitude had prevailed, Christianity would have become little more than a sect of Judaism. And then, more than likely, you and I would not be Christians today.]

So some of these stricter Jewish Christians went to Antioch and stirred up trouble with the Gentile Christians, telling them that they had to become Jews first. Paul and Barnabas argued strongly against this, but things came to a deadlock.

There was only one way to resolve this. A council of Church leaders must take place in Jerusalem, the headquarters of the Church. The question at stake was: is the new Christian way of life for the select few or for all the world?

[Today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 15, omits verses 3-21, so I will add here what is taking place.]

In answer to the stricter Jews, Simon Peter [Acts 15: 6-12] reminded them of how he had received the Gentile, Cornelius [a Roman centurion], and his household into the Church ten years earlier. And the proof that Peter had acted rightly was that God granted His Holy Spirit to these newly-received Gentile converts, just as God had done for the Apostles at Pentecost [Acts 10: 17-48].

Then James [Acts 15: 13-21] spoke. He was the respected leader of the Jerusalem Church. His knees were said to be as hard as a camel's because he knelt in prayer so often and for so long. Also, James was a rigorous observer of the Law. If James came down on the side of the Gentiles, then the matter was settled. And James did come down on their side. The Council of Jerusalem declared that Jews and Gentiles were both welcome in the Church. The Gospel message was intended not for a select few but for the whole world.

There was one additional matter that involved how Jews and Gentiles were to live together as brothers and sisters, and James suggested three regulations that Gentile Christians ought to keep out of sensitivity for their Jewish brothers and sisters.

They must abstain from meat that had been sacrificed to pagan gods. What was left over from the pagan sacrifices often ended up for sale in the market places and, buying from there, one could be eating meat that had been offered to idols. So they needed to be attentive.

They must abstain from animals that were strangled and abstain from their blood. To the Jew, blood was the seat of life, and life belonged to God alone. They so argued because when blood flows away, life ebbs away too. So the Gentile is ordered to only eat meat prepared in the Jewish way.

And they must abstain from fornication. The Christian had to be pure while living in a world of impurity.

Without these three regulations, there would not be any interaction between Jew and Gentile. So that last barrier was addressed. And the principle was firmly established that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians belonged to one family in Jesus Christ.

Once the Church had come to its decision, it acted with truthfulness and charity. The terms of the decision were written-down in a letter. Then the letter was entrusted to Judas [also known as Barsabbas] and Silas, who went back to Antioch along with Paul and Barnabas. Had Paul and Barnabas come back alone, their enemies might have doubted that they brought back the correct message. But Judas and Silas were official ambassadors and they guaranteed the truthfulness of the decision.

The Church was charitable in sending a person as well as a letter. A letter could have sounded coldly official. But the personal words of Judas and Silas added a kind warmth that a mere letter could never have achieved.

Are there lessons here for us as people of the Church today? I would like to look at two. The first is that because of this decision of the Council of Jerusalem that the Gospel message was meant for the world, we are here today. Most of us are of Gentile background. But, by the grace of God, Jew and Gentile are welcome to become members of the Body of Christ, the Church. And we are grateful.

The second lesson is this one. On an everyday level so many hurt feelings and misunderstandings might be avoided if only people would sit down and talk with each other respectfully, instead of firing-off an angry letter.

While social media has its merits, it can also be a vehicle of great damage to people's feelings and their reputations by what is posted for anyone to see, and then to forward to countless other "interested parties."

Sometimes we have a difficult message to deliver. My father gave me this wise advice many years ago when he told me: "If someone needed to deliver that same difficult message to you, how would like them to say it to you? So put yourself in the other person's place. Let your feelings guide you in respecting theirs."

When they are to be ordained as a bishop, candidates take a personal motto that is displayed on their coat-of-arms. It says something about the style of leadership that they hope to exercise as a bishop.

Cardinal James Hickey [1920-2004], who was once the Bishop of Cleveland [1974-1980], and who ordained me as a priest, took as his episcopal motto: "Veritatem in caritate." It is a quote from Saint Paul's letter to the Ephesians [chapter 4, verse 15], and it means: "Let us proclaim the truth [veritatem] in charity [in caritate]."

This motto sums up the scene and the emotions of today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. "Let us proclaim the truth in charity." Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians are members of one family in Jesus Christ.

And it is an excellent motto for us to live by too. In all the circumstances and emotions of our everyday living, "Let us proclaim the truth in charity."