

FIFTH SUNDAY
OF EASTER

YEAR A



Prayer

Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.

For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.

Reading the Word

First Reading:

Acts 6:1-7

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends,

select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Second Reading:

1 Peter 2:4-9

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture:

"See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever

FIRST READING

Acts 6:1-7

PSALM

Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19

SECOND READING

1 Peter 2:4-9

GOSPEL

John 14:1-12

believes in him will not be put to shame."

To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

"The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,"

and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Gospel: John 14:1-12

Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am,

*Scripture quotations from
New Revised Standard Version Bible:
Catholic Edition, © 1989, 1993.
Used with permission.*

there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

Hearing the Word

“Tensions”

Halfway through the Easter season the liturgy of the word very realistically addresses the issue of tensions within an individual Christian, and the tensions within the Christian community. While the resurrection of Jesus changed everything, his followers remain in a world fraught with tensions and conflicts, which had, and has, the real potential to weaken faith and undermine the Christians’ the commitment to living their

life in the light of the resurrection.

The first Christian community was not without its problems. The first reading reports that unfairness in the distribution of the common goods caused tensions among members of the Jerusalem community. All the early Christians in Jerusalem were Jewish, but they came from different backgrounds. Some of them came from Palestine, the land of Jesus. But many of them grew up and lived outside Palestine. These were called the “diaspora” Jews or “Hellenists”. Many of those Hellenists moved to Jerusalem in their old age hoping to die and be buried in the holy city. This accounted for a large number of Hellenist widows in Jerusalem, many of whom joined the Christian community after Pentecost. Apparently, these Hellenist widows were overlooked or discriminated against when it came to distribution of material support available to the community members. To address this problem, a special council of seven men was formed, and given the task of managing the material and administrative needs of the community. Their names reveal that they themselves were Hellenists. They were selected on the grounds of their wisdom, and were guided by the Spirit, which shows that even the management of the administrative affairs of the community was considered a spiritual task. This episode provides a good insight into how the first Christian community functioned and developed its structures.

Yet, it is the emphasis on the absolute centrality of evangelisation that stands out in this passage. The apostles addressed the community with the words,

“it is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables”. This statement establishes an order of importance among various concerns. The most important was the proclamation of the word of God, and the central point of this proclamation was the resurrection of Jesus.

The letter of Peter addresses yet another tension that existed within the broader Jewish community in the early days of the Church. The majority of Jesus’ contemporaries ardently expected the coming of the Messiah. And yet, when Jesus the Messiah came, there was a sharp division among the Jews. Some welcomed him, but the majority rejected him. The author of 1 Peter, himself a Jew, reacts to these divisions by presenting an argument for Jesus’ Messiahship. He employs the symbol of a stone to describe Jesus, and address the tensions and paradoxes his story might have caused. First, the natural stone is cold and dead, yet Jesus is the “living stone”. In this clever way the author refers to the resurrection when Jesus’ dead and cold body was transformed into a living and vibrant organism.

Second, the stone is often an obstacle which can cause someone to stumble and fall. Yet, the same stone can be the “cornerstone” – an essential part of the building that holds the entire structure together. The risen Jesus became a stumbling stone for those who rejected him by not believing in his resurrection. They “stumbled” by excluding themselves from the Christian community through their unbelief. At the same time, Jesus became the “cornerstone” – the central and binding element

for the entire life of those who accepted him and believed in the resurrection.

Third, the very image of the stone was borrowed by the author from Psalm 118:22. In fact, this entire passage of 1 Peter is built on allusions to and quotations from the Old Testament. For some, holding on to their Jewish practices prevented them from accepting Jesus as the Messiah. For others, reading their Scripture provided clear indication that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God in fulfillment of his promises made to the earlier generations of the Israelites.

The author concludes with a statement that beautifully describes those for whom Jesus has become the living cornerstone. By their acceptance of the risen Lord they have become a chosen, priestly and holy people, belonging exclusively to God. This phrase is drawn from the text of the Sinai Covenant where Israelites were given the promise of becoming just such a people if they keep God's covenant (cf. Exod 19:5-6). By welcoming Jesus and making him the cornerstone of their life, Christians fulfil the Sinai covenant. Faith in the risen Lord allowed them to put to rest tensions and contradictions that the life and work of Jesus might have caused.

The Gospel passage comes Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples. In this particular part of this extensive speech, the disciples appear distraught and confused. Since Jesus was telling them about his impending departure from this world, they were deeply afraid of being left alone. Jesus' response to their concern was straightforward.

First, he told them about his destination and purpose – he is going to the Father to prepare a place for them. These words indicate that their final destiny lies in eternal life in God's presence, and in the company of Jesus. Second, he called himself "the way, the truth and the life". This phrase provides the best summary of Jesus' identity and mission. "The way" means that living according to his teaching sets one on the path to God and truly human life. "The truth" means that Jesus is the fullest and trustworthy representation of God. "The life" means that belief in Jesus leads to eternal life.

Finally, believing in Jesus would empower the disciples to continue with his work on earth. They would be able to "do greater works", which means that they will lead even more people to faith that he did in his time on earth. While the disciples' concerns were understandable, and the tension they felt at the prospect of Jesus' absence was fully justified, they were admonished to deal with such confusion and tension by firmly holding on to their master even in his absence.

Today's readings portray groups and individuals facing tensions and confusion. In the community of Acts, tensions were caused by material and administrative matters. The community of Peter lived in tension with their Jewish neighbours for whom Jesus became a "stumbling stone". In the Gospel, the disciples face uncertainty and confusion in their hearts and on a very individual level. Yet, in all three cases the advice on how to deal with the situation is the same, "focus on the risen Lord." This focus on Jesus and belief in

his resurrection would allow for arranging individual and community affairs in the order of proper importance. With Christ at the centre, everything falls into place, and tensions relax. Scripture, read in the light of Jesus' resurrection, provides the kind of clarity needed to order the Christian life and concerns, to alleviate the tensions that inevitably arise, and make our paths straight and less complicated. The Psalmist knew this when he called the faithful to rejoice because "the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness".

Listening to the Word of God

One of the reasons why the Bible is loved by many is that it does not try to hide the tensions and human weaknesses of God's people. There is no pretence or cover up – all is open for all to see and learn from. Right from the beginning we can see that the Church was never perfect, there were tensions and conflicts which continue throughout history up to the present time. In our modern context, one of the major areas of conflict is the relationship between Christianity and the modern world. Some believed that Christianity has nothing to say or offer the people living in the new reality of the secularized and globalized world. Many of the institutions that in the past were run almost exclusively by the Churches, such as orphanages, homes for the aged, shelters for the homeless and disabled were now taken over by the state. Religious worldview and the hope for life beyond death has been reduced in the eyes of many to the realm of fantasy and myth. The situation of Christians today in

many ways resembles that of the early Christians who were seen as an isolated sect with strange beliefs and dangerous practices. Modern believers live in a state of tension with the secular world whether they like it or not. In this situation, the message of today's liturgy becomes very relevant. Christianity always faced tensions and prevailed when it remained faithful to its roots, which lie in the uncompromising faith in the Risen Lord.

Many of us have experienced internal conflicts in our parishes and communities. When conflicts are not handled well, the Church suffers because of divisions that divert it from fulfilling its core mission. The same dynamics work in all our relationships, as conflict is ever present. Such tension can be either a threat or a catalyst for change. The difference in outcome depends on how conflict and tensions are managed. The sign of good conflict resolution in the Church is that the core mission of evangelization is not compromised. The apostles recognized conflicts as potential detractors to their mission and resolved the problem through delegation of certain duties to others who would take on the responsibility. When the mission is clear, then conflicts are handled in a way that does not compromise it.

It is not only conflicts in parishes that are highlighted in the readings, but also personal crises that cause us to doubt, as we face challenges in life that make us feel abandoned and hopeless. What we learn from the doubts and confusion expressed by the disciples is the importance of questions and honesty with our feelings.

The disciples asked questions, expressed doubts and in the process received answers that strengthened their faith and trust in Jesus. Faith grows from honest expressions of doubt and questioning. Conflicts and tensions are part of our individual and communal journeys of faith. We have been given a companion in the person of the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom to respond in ways that are focused on the core mission of our calling as disciples of Jesus, the proclamation of the Gospel.

Proverb

“If you
are not
part of
the solu-
tion you
are part
of the
problem.”

Action

Self-examination

Reflect on a current conflict in your personal and parish life. What are the issues driving this conflict and creating tensions?

How can you apply the principles learnt in the reflection on today's readings to the issues identified in the reflection in the first point of this self-examination?

Response to God

Be open to God about your feelings and make a list of questions that you would like to ask God. Pray for an open heart and mind that is responsive to God's answers not only as you read the scriptures but in unexpected sources and events.

Response to your World

I identify one of the struggles or tensions which affect my life and decide to do something to reach its solution, preferably taking inspiration from today's readings.

Our communities are constantly struggling with conflicts and tensions. As a group we focus on one of them and seek ways to address and solve it.

Prayer

O Holy Spirit, grant us wisdom to respond to the conflicts and tensions in our world and the courage to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

Make us instruments of harmony, and restore our peace of heart in the midst of the tensions, difficulties and struggles of life. Amen