

SIXTH SUNDAY

OF EASTER

YEAR A



FIRST READING

Acts 8:5–8, 14–17

PSALM

Psalms 66:1–7, 16, 20

SECOND READING

1 Peter 3:15–18

GOSPEL

John 14:15–21

### Prayer

*Psalms 66:1–7, 16, 20*

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise. Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!

Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you. All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.”

Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot.

There we rejoiced in him, who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations—let the rebellious not exalt themselves.

Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for me. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me.

### Reading the Word

*First Reading: Acts 8:5–8, 14–17*

Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened

eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

*Second Reading:*

*1 Peter 3:15–18*

In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will,

than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit

*Gospel: John 14:15–21*

Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

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## Hearing the Word

### *"Spiritual Resurrection"*

The Easter season's readings emphasize that Jesus' resurrection provides meaning and direction for believers' lives. Today's liturgy pays particular attention to the effects of the resurrection on the human heart. Because of its attention to the Holy Spirit, this Sunday's liturgy also begins to prepare for the concluding celebration of the Easter season, Pentecost. The first reading, from the book of Acts, describes an episode which is sometimes called "the Samaritan Pentecost", because it describes how the inhabitants of Samaria experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit. Another interesting and significant feature related in this text, is a gap between the baptism of the Samaritans and their reception of the Spirit, that followed only later. Such separation is unusual, as baptism was normally accompanied by immediate descent of the Spirit (cf. Acts 2:38; 9:17-18) or even preceded by it (cf. Acts 10:44-48).

Phillip's mission to Samaria presents the first significant step in the Church's expansion beyond Jerusalem, and into the non-Jewish lands. The Samaritans believed in Christ, responding to Phillip's proclamation, healings and exorcisms. These proved to them that his message was accompanied by divine power. The Samaritans were baptised by Phillip, but it was only after Peter and John came down from Jerusalem, and laid their hands upon them, that they received the Holy Spirit, thereby becoming full members of the Chris-

tian community. Why did the author of Acts present coming to full membership of the Christian community as a two-step process? One of the possible explanations is that he wanted to emphasise that the formal act of baptism must be accompanied by the internal transformation effected by the reception of the Spirit. The Samaritans formally accepted Christ as their Lord and Saviour, but only with the power of the Spirit would they be able to outwardly demonstrate the effects of their conversion. This teaches us that belief in the resurrection cannot be reduced to a mere intellectual acknowledgement that Jesus is risen, while life goes on as if nothing changed. The effects of belief in the risen Lord, are not limited to convincing a person to join the Christian community. The resurrection affects the human spirit at the deepest level, and makes it ready to receive and channel the divine power to demonstrate it outwardly.

The internal effects of the resurrection are even clearer in the second reading. The passage begins with the exhortation, "in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord". These words imply the need for a deep internal conviction that the risen Jesus is indeed God, since only God is holy, and the necessity of making him the centre of the believer's life.

Following this statement, the author discusses two manifestations of such a conviction. The first one is an ability to present and explain reasons for Christian hope, clearly hope for the resurrec-

tion of the body and eternal life. Christians must be able to provide a sound and convincing explanation for beliefs that they hold. This ability can only be developed by a Christian who has seriously reflected on his or her faith, and grounded it firmly in the Scripture and experience. Such a defence of faith must be done in a respectful and gentle manner, and not in the spirit of contention and hostility.

The second manifestation of the sanctification of Christ in a person's heart is their outwardly visible ethical conduct, particularly when somebody is confronted with insults and slander. Early Christians frequently experienced adversity and opposition. The author admonishes them to behave impeccably so that they could not be accused of any wrongdoing. If they face persecution, their suffering should be that of innocents. Confronting harassment in such a manner they would imitate Christ himself, who suffered innocently. In doing so, Jesus died in the body, but remained very much alive in the spirit. Being alive in one's heart, according to this passage, consists of a sound and profound understanding of the faith a Christian professes, and a clear conscience resulting from righteous living. Spiritual resurrection in 1 Peter is about keeping the mind alive, by growing in understanding of the foundation of the faith, and keeping the conscience pure, by living according to Christ's teaching. The study of the Scriptures seems indispensable to accomplishing these goals.

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of today's extraordinarily rich Gospel passage is its presentation of the intimate link that exists between God, Jesus, the Spirit and the disciples. These persons are bound together by love. In this part of the Gospel, Jesus continues to speak about his departure. He assures the troubled disciples about his return; they will not be left orphans. But what form will this return take? He certainly hints at his coming at the end of times, the Parousia. But he speaks mainly about his return and eternal presence through the Spirit who will be sent by the Father in response to Jesus' request.

This Spirit binds Jesus and the disciples in such a way that they will be able to contemplate the face of God through this union. The disciples need to respond to this presence with love, manifested through keeping Jesus' commandments. However, in the Gospel of John, Jesus gave only a single commandment, "this is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15:12). The love of Jesus flowing within the disciples must be expressed through acts of love towards others. Jesus' love is a demanding love which can never be reduced to a sentimental feeling, or abstract admiration. Jesus demonstrated his love by going to the cross, and his subsequent resurrection proved that such love is capable of defeating death. Living out this kind of love, the disciples are assured of their own resurrection, because self-giving love

amounts, already in this life, to the spiritual resurrection.

Today's liturgy focuses on the impact that Jesus's resurrection has, or should have, on believers' hearts and lives. The prerequisite for the bodily resurrection at the end of time is the spiritual resurrection in this life. This present resurrection is the rising from the tomb of internal apathy and indifference. This perhaps was what the author of Acts had in mind when presenting the Samaritans' two-step process of coming to Christianity. The author of 1 Peter emphasised that adherence to the risen Christ involves continuing intellectual and moral renewal that will be obvious to outsiders. John the Evangelist identifying love as the force that binds disciples with God, shows that it is manifested through obeying Jesus' command to love one another. Such love makes a person internally alive, risen from the tomb of self-centredness and selfishness. A Christian who lives out Jesus' resurrection in this manner becomes a living illustration of the presence of God's life-giving Spirit. Looking at such a person, others might say with the Psalmist, "Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals".

### **Listening to the Word of God**

One way to understand the impact of Christianity on any community is to ask non-Christians to describe Christians. Some answers which people regularly give in reference to Christians include the following: "Christians go to Church

on Sundays; they don't go to parties, or take drugs or have fun"; "Some Christians think they are better than everyone else but they are hypocritical and judgmental"; and "Christians believe in Jesus Christ, celebrate Easter and Christmas and fight amongst themselves as they have so many different beliefs." Generally, in the general populace, there seems to be more negative references to Christians than positive ones.

It is also important to ask Christians themselves to describe who they are, to explain and defend their beliefs. Many Christians explain their faith through "do's" and "don'ts", and measure their status according to certain laws, for example attending weekly mass, giving to the poor, reciting the rosary, staying sexually pure, etc. It is no wonder that non-Christians describe us according to these "do's" and "don'ts".

Too often, after catechism classes are finished, young adults limit their faith practice to following rules and certain practices, believing them sufficient. As life goes on, these young people face many pressures and challenges, which do not leave much space or time to engage in any meaningful practice of faith. As a result, when questioned about our faith or observed by outsiders, our Christianity looks shallow and insincere. Many, after active participation in the life of their parish and youth groups, gradually drift away from the Church. After a time, feeling spiritual emptiness they even join other Churches and sects which lure them with



promises of benefits and with vibrant community life. All of this results from the lack of growth in faith.

Jesus came to restore the relationship between humanity and God. A relationship may start with “do’s” and “don’ts” as is the case between parents and children, but that is not the goal. Parents look forward to a time when they can enjoy adult relationships with their children, relationships that are not based on rules but mutual love. Similarly, in our Christian story, we are taught the rules and principles as the foundation of our faith so that as we grow in faith, we can develop a relationship with God where we are driven by love not rules. It is this relationship of love that transforms us into loving persons, who are able to share this relationship with others as part of the witness of our faith.

The world is tired of “do’s” and “don’ts”, many hunger for a relationship of love that is mutual and transforming. It was St Augustine who said “love and do anything that you like” because he understood that love is the motivation and basis of an ethical life that pleases God. We can offer the example of such life and love when we experience a periodic spiritual resurrection. From time to time we have to feel the power of the Risen Lord in us to rekindle our passion and zeal. Being a member of a group makes this easier because the faith and zeal of others, and sharing faith with them, gives us the inspiration needed to feel spiritually alive again.

## Proverb

“What  
you help  
a child  
to love  
can be  
more  
important  
than  
what you  
help him  
to learn.”

## Action

### Self-examination

Reflect on your definition of a Christian – is it about rules and regulations or about love and a change of heart?

What motivates you to follow Christ and seek an ethical life – is it fear of breaking rules or love for Christ?

## Response to God

Reflect on your relationship with God – is it rule based or love based. Ask for the grace to take the first step to a loving relationship with God as the basis of your Christian life.

## Response to your World

In the course of this week I will conscientiously take up a practice of reading of some material that will lead me to a deeper understanding of my faith and of Christ.

One of the reasons why some reject Christianity is because they perceive it as a religion of rules and not a relationship of love. Discuss the rules that you follow in your group and examine whether they are helpful in making the group live a more Christian life.

## Prayer

One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

(Ps. 27:4-6 NRS)