

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Some men had come down from Judea (to Antioch) and taught the brothers: "Unless you have yourselves circumcised in the tradition of Moses you cannot be saved."

Acts 15, 1-2; 22-29



"But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have told you."

John 14, 23-29

The Christian community has long been troubled by literalists, people devoid of common sense and bent on observing rules and regulations in every detail. In the fledgling Christian community of Antioch, some, who had come from Jerusalem, started to demand that adult, Gentile converts be circumcised. These Judeans paid no attention to the health risks involved. All that mattered to them was adherence to the letter of the law. Paul and Barnabas had the good sense to refer the matter to community leaders in Jerusalem. It took what is now known as the Council of Jerusalem (A:D:49) to resolve the matter. Those councillors, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, relied on common sense in reaching their decision.

Not only did they write a letter to the new converts in Antioch, but they sent Judas and Silas to confirm the contents of their letter. However, it is fascinating to read what the leaders in Jerusalem regarded as "essential" for membership of the new Christian community: "It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves not to saddle you with any burden beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols; from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from fornication. Avoid these, and you will do what is right." (Acts 15, 28-29)

Now there's an unusual list of "don'ts"! And notice that there are no "dos". Understandably, participation in pagan sacrifice and fornication are out. But so too are rare and medium-rare steak, and black pudding. And what about what's not listed? The glaring omission is Jesus' new commandment: "Love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples." (John 13, 34-35)

This prompted me to stop and ponder the relationship between the Church and things like culture and custom that has been played out over centuries. Moreover, "God's will" has sometimes been twisted and interpreted to accommodate barbarities perpetrated in the name of Church and the guarding of orthodoxy. For example, people gratuitously labelled as witches were burned at the stake because they were regarded as being in league with the devil. There was a time when people of my generation were taught about "just wars", as though killing could ever be justified. The Spanish Inquisition was designed to rid the Church of "heretics", and Crusades were conducted to put Muslims in their place. There have been times in religious orders when the direction of the superior was equated with the will of

God, regardless of whether or not what was directed made sense. And we've probably all encountered people who are convinced that only their way of doing religion is in harmony with God's will. Moreover, throughout history there have been those who have invoked natural law and God's will to justify slavery, caste and class distinction, submission of women, and inequitable distribution of opportunity and resources.

Let's not forget that our contemporary Church is not free of squabbles and bickering. They go on at every level. There are Cardinals who criticise the efforts made by Pope Francis to welcome divorced Catholics back to participating fully in Eucharist. Arguments go on in local churches and parishes about the use of inclusive language in the liturgy, the wording of the Creed we use at Mass on Sundays, why giving the homily is restricted to ordained priests and deacons, and whether parish funds are for assisting the poor or buying a new organ. In large organisations there is need to have policies. The Spirit of Jesus can be found in policies. But in every policy handed down by a parish priest or bishop? Policies can take pressure off some, complicate life for others and lead others still to parade in triumph at getting their own way. New policy is often born out of healthy change and new developments. At its best it is about keeping us all pointed in the same general direction, in harmony with one another in our efforts to follow the way to God modelled for us by Jesus.

I suggest that the answer to all these questions and challenges is to be found in today's gospel reading: "Jesus said to the disciples; 'If anyone loves me *she/he will keep my word...but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.*'"

Surely this means that God's Spirit, present deep within us, will prompt our hearts and minds, and help us to discover the meaning of God's Word as Jesus proclaimed it. Then it's up to us to translate God's Word into appropriate action. But for that to happen, we have to first take time to reflect on Jesus' words as they are recorded in the Gospels.

An indication that we are on the right track will be that we will know peace deep within. Not the peace, Jesus was quick to say, which the world offers. Rather it is the peace of interior wholeness. It is a sense of being at peace with ourselves and with those around us; free from agitation, anxiety, worry and hostility; a sense of self-worth based on knowing that we are loved by God. It is a peace that cannot be stolen from us, for it does not depend on the opinions of others, on our successes and failures or on the passing fads and fantasies of the world around us. When we experience that kind of peace, we can be confident that the Spirit of Jesus is alive and active in our words and actions.