

Easter 6C 2016

What Kind of Church?

During this Easter Season, we have been listening to the Acts of the Apostles. Written by Saint Luke, the Acts of the Apostles is best understood as a sequel to his Gospel. The Gospel tells the story of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection; the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of the early church. What is so extraordinary about this story is the phenomenal growth of the church that took place in these early years. But this growth was not without difficulty, without trial, or without disagreement within the church.

At a particular moment those first Christians had to make a momentous decision: Who were they, and what did God want them to be. All of them were pious Jewish believers, and their first converts were Jewish as well. But at a certain moment in the life of the early Church, some believers such as St. Paul began to preach the gospel to Gentiles; that is, to people who were not Jewish and had never practiced the Law of Moses. And so the church found itself at a crossroad. What kind of community did God want it to be? Would they be a community in which everyone would be required to adopt a Jewish way of life? Or was God doing something new? Would the church... could the church... be a united community of Jewish *and* Gentile believers, each group practicing the *same* faith but in a distinctive way? This is what today's first reading is all about.

The problem the early church faced is a problem the church has faced many times in its history. What kind of a church does the Spirit of God want us to be? What kind of community must the church be if it is to proclaim the gospel to the world? For example after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, the church had to reform itself in order to live the gospel in a faithful way. Fifty years ago, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Church had to do something similar.

And today Pope Francis is calling us to further renewal by asking us to become a community of mercy, a field hospital for the wounded that applies the healing balm of the gospel's mercy to those whose lives have been wounded by sin.

The question the church must ask itself is the same question we must ask ourselves about our parish. What kind of parish does Christ want us to be so that we can live and proclaim the gospel? How should we, as a parish community, practice the faith so that we can reflect the grace of Jesus Christ that has touched our lives?

The Acts of the Apostles teaches us that it took time for the church to understand what the Spirit of God was doing. It took time for the church to understand that God was doing something new and different. You see we are always more comfortable holding on to what we know and are familiar with than we are embracing the new challenges the Spirit brings. But it is only when we listen to the Spirit of God and follow the lead of God's Spirit that we begin to see where Christ is leading us, and what kind of parish and church God wants us to be.

In these final days of the Easter, we are waiting for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost to renew our lives and the life of the church. As we wait, let us pray for the grace of a new Pentecost that will renew our lives and the life of the church. Let us pray that we will become the parish and church God wants us to be. For it is only when we become what God wants us to be that we find our deepest meaning and joy. It is only then that we are satisfied.