

3rd Sunday of Easter - C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41

Last week we heard how the Apostles began to minister to the people in the same way that Jesus had done. This week we hear of the persecution the apostles endured because of their ministry. The Episcopalians and Lutherans last week heard of both the ministry and the persecution and this week hear of the conversion of Saul (Paul) on the road to Damascus and of his subsequent baptism – the only account of the baptism of any of the apostles in Holy Scripture.

This is the second persecution of the apostles, the first having occurred in Chapter 4, verses 1-22 where Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin. This second Sanhedrin arraignment parallels the first in typical Lucan style – Luke does things in twos – and many scholars have regarded this passage as a doublet of the first. However the *Mishnah*, the first section of the *Talmud*, comprising a collection of early oral interpretations of the Scriptures as compiled about A.D. 200, provides for legal admonition after the first violation, with punishment meted out only in case of recidivism (sort of a two-strikes-and-you're-out). I am inclined to believe that both persecutions took place, just as reported in Holy Scripture.

²⁷ When they [the captain and the court officers] had brought them [the apostles] in and made them stand before the Sanhedrin, the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ “We gave you strict orders (did we not?) to stop teaching in that name.

In keeping with the two persecutions, the orders were given in Acts 4:18.

Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and want to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

For Saint Luke, the apostles’ preaching is bound to Jerusalem according to the divine ordering of sacred history. The centrality of Jerusalem in Lucan history emphasizes the continuity between the era of Israel and that of the Church. The “Holy City” is the geographic center of sacred history, and the primitive Christian community is bound to it not just in fact, but of necessity.

²⁹ But Peter and the apostles said in reply, “We must obey God rather than men.

Because Jerusalem is the center of Israel and the New Covenant is to replace the old, the apostles have no choice but to start here.

³⁰ The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree.

Galatians 3:13 says “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written ‘cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree’” (Deuteronomy 21:23). Luke is arguing from the Law itself the magnitude of the people’s shame in “laying violent hands” on their Savior. This

discourse here illustrates Luke 21:12-13.

³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. ³² We are witnesses of these things, as is the holy Spirit that God has given to those who obey him.”

God sends the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him, and the apostles are obedient to the prompting of the Spirit.

Omitted from our reading for today, is Gamaliel’s response “Fellow Israelites, be careful what you are about to do to these men. . . So now I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God.” Gamaliel, a member of the Sanhedrin, was Saint Paul’s teacher (Acts 22:3).

^{40b} [The Sanhedrin] ordered them [the apostles] to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, and dismissed them. ⁴¹ So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.

The apostles must have remembered the Lord’s words during the sermon on the mount: *Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven* (Matthew 5:7-8).

2nd Reading - Revelation 5:11-14

Last week we heard Saint John describe the part of his vision of the heavenly liturgy where he saw the Holy Place and standing in there was a priest-king, the high priest, who identified himself as the Alpha and Omega, who was dead and lives forever and has authority over death and Hades (Acts 1:17-18), The Christ.

Then, as we read through the book of Revelation, come the letters to the seven churches; churches which were not necessarily major centers, but which were located in sequence on a major road, with Ephesus as the point of departure. This makes this book in the form of a circular letter which could have been carried easily from one place to the next. The number seven is significant in that in Hebrew numerology it is the number of the covenant and as such, the letter is not addressed just to seven churches, but to all congregations who form part of the new covenant. After the letters, Chapter 4 has us looking with John’s eyes through an open door and seeing a throne. The Holy Place was separated from the Holy of Holies by a curtain and in the Holy of Holies was the Ark of the Covenant (Hebrews 8:3-4). When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38) leaving an open door. The Ark of the Covenant was more than a box, it was a cherubim throne. Cherubim thrones were not uncommon in that area of the world during the time of King David. What makes the Hebrew cherubim throne unique is that it is not occupied; the throne in other countries was occupied by the queen mother. What Saint John sees as he looks through the open door is the throne which was located in the Holy of Holies, the place which could be entered only by the High Priest and only once a year (the day of atonement) and then

only for the purpose of offering sacrifice to God. Saint John tells us in chapter 5, verse 6, that he sees a lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne. Hebrews chapter 5 tells us that the duty of the high priest is to offer sacrifice for sins. This sacrifice was placed on the Ark of the Covenant by the high priest. The lamb which John sees is standing, so it is not dead, but it looks as though it had been slain – it is the resurrected Jesus, the Lamb of God, continually offering His sacrifice for us in heaven (recall that time only has domain on earth, once we die we enter the timeless dimension of eternity – the eternal now).

This brings us to the point of today's reading:

¹¹ I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne

A sort of guard of honor surrounding the throne and proclaiming the sublime perfection of Christ the Lamb.

and the living creatures

Notice that they are alive with Christ in heaven, they are not dead.

and the elders. They were countless in number,

The phrase used for “countless” by Saint John is “100,000,000 plus 1,000,000,” which is used to indicate an infinite number.

¹² and they cried out in a loud voice:

According to Dr. Scott Hahn, angels talk, while the redeemed sing.

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing.”

The focus is seven words, suggesting the fullness of power and glory, seven representing the covenant in Hebrew numerology. The first four words concern the Lamb's dominion (power, riches, wisdom, and strength), four in Hebrew numerology representing the world; the last three express the adoration (honor, glory, and blessing), three representing completeness in Hebrew numerology.

¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out:

All of creation (in heaven, on the earth, under the earth, in the sea) becomes a part of the cosmic chorus.

“To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever.”

The offering is both to God and to the Lamb – kingship and dominion belong jointly to the Father and to Christ. The first prayer was offered only to the Lamb, the second one is offered to both the Lamb and the Father.

¹⁴ The four living creatures

The fundamental idea here is Ezekiel 1:10 – the whole of creation in which God is constantly present – what is most splendid in animate life: the lion = nobility, the bull = strength, the man = wisdom, the eagle = swiftness.

answered, “Amen,” and the elders

There are twenty-four elders, twelve representing the tribes of Israel, the chosen people of the Old Covenant and twelve representing the apostles, the New Israel.

fell down and worshiped.

The posture of submission and homage. The Biblical philosophy of history is that all history, created and controlled by God’s personal and total government, is moving inescapably toward the universal dominion of the Lord Jesus Christ. The new and final age of history, the messianic age, has arrived; the New Covenant has come! Behold, He has conquered!

Gospel - John 21:1-19

In last week’s gospel reading we heard of Jesus’ first two appearances to His apostles. Today we hear about His third appearance. This story is thought by most commentators to be an appendix added to the gospel conclusion (chapter 20) we heard last week.

^{21:1} After this, Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias.

The Sea of Galilee. Tiberias, a city on the western shore, was founded by Herod Antipas sometime around A.D. 20 and named after Tiberias Caesar. The site had previously been used for a burial ground and was therefore unclean. The city seems to have been entirely Gentile in New Testament times. Jesus is not said to have entered the city and the common opinion of interpreters is that He never did.

He revealed himself in this way. ² Together were Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee’s sons, and two others of his disciples. ³ Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.”

The decision to go fishing is not surprising if the story had originally been about the first (only?) appearance to Peter and the disciples. Now it seems awkward since in John 20:21 Jesus commissioned them “as the Father has sent me, so I send you,” and this commission seems to have been ignored.

They said to him, “We also will come with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. ⁴ When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.

Non-recognition is typical of appearance stories [Mary Magdalene at the tomb (John 20:15), the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:14-15)]. It is also better suited to an independent appearance story.

**⁵ Jesus said to them, “Children, have you caught anything to eat?” They answered him, “No.”
⁶ So he said to them, “Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something.”**

The lucky side. Nothing miraculous so far, a person on shore could spot fish which might be invisible to those in the boat.

So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish.

So far the story has a close parallel to Luke 5:4-7 where Peter and his partners are recruited (“I will make you fishers of men”).

⁷ So the disciple whom Jesus loved

Saint John.

said to Peter, “It is the Lord.”

The recognition and appearance of Jesus is the miracle in this story.

When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad,

The Jews were sensitive about performing greetings without being properly dressed.

and jumped into the sea. ⁸ The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish. ⁹ When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire

The only other mention of a charcoal fire in the Bible is in John 18:18, beside which Peter denies Christ three times.

with fish on it and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you just caught.”

This request contradicts the previous verse where a fish was cooking but it does serve to stress the role of fishing as symbolizing the apostolic mission.

¹¹ So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three large

fish.

Most commentators, ancient and modern, have felt that this number is symbolic, but there is no agreement as to its nature. It does appear likely that the fish symbolize those who will be brought into the Church through the apostolic preaching. Saint Jerome's interpretation is that ancient biologists calculated that there were precisely 153 species of fish – this means that the disciples will “fish” for every kind of men.

Even though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come, have breakfast.” And none of the disciples dared to ask him, “Who are you?” because they realized it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish.

Like the last supper and the feeding of the five thousand there is no indication that Jesus ate.

¹⁴ This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead.

This ties this chapter to the preceding one where He appeared in the upper room twice, a week apart.

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter,

This three-fold affirmation beside the charcoal fire is a reversal of Peter's three-fold denial beside a charcoal fire.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me

Agape = self-sacrificing love.

more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Philiās = brotherly love.

He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” ¹⁶ He then said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Agape.

He said to him, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Philiās.

He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Philius.

Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, “Do you love me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

Philius.

(Jesus) said to him, “Feed my sheep.

The interplay with the Greek words for “love” is interesting but the commentaries do not show what the significance is. To me it seems as though Jesus is showing Saint Peter what true love is and Peter is unable at this point in time to make this commitment. He did however, live out a self-sacrificing love which manifested itself in his (Peter’s) crucifixion for the faith. What is certain however, is that Jesus, the good shepherd, is turning His earthly flock over to His duly appointed minister – “Feed my lambs . . . tend my sheep . . . feed my sheep.” Lambs will not wander far from the flock but need to be fed, sheep need guidance (tending) as well as nourishment. The primacy was given to Peter directly and immediately. The Church has always understood, and Vatican I defined: “We therefore teach and decree that, according to the testimony of the Gospel, the primacy of jurisdiction over the universal Church of God was immediately and directly promised and given to Blessed Peter the Apostle by Christ our Lord . . . And it was upon Simon Peter alone that Jesus after His resurrection bestowed the jurisdiction of chief pastor and ruler over all His fold in the words: “Feed my lambs . . . Tend my sheep . . . Feed my sheep.”

¹⁸ Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.”

Jesus declares that Peter will fulfill his earlier promise to follow Jesus even to death (John 13:37-38).

¹⁹ He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, “Follow me.”

Walk in my footsteps, all the way to the cross. This is the oldest written attestation of Peter’s martyrdom by crucifixion. The words “Follow me” would have reminded the Apostle of the first call he received (Matthew 4:19) and of the fact that Christ requires of His disciples complete self-surrender: *If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up the cross daily and follow me* (Luke 9:23).