

4th Sunday of Easter – Cycle 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 13:14, 43-52

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles form a single historical and literary unit. The gospel starts with the birth of Jesus and traces the salvation history of Israel, displaying the promises which had been made to her and ending with the fulfillment of those covenant promises in the sacrificial death of Jesus. Acts starts with the birth of the Church and displays the covenant promises which have been made to her. All members of the New Israel, the Church, share in the inheritance which is promised.

After the initial establishment of the Church in Jerusalem, it spread outward with Philip going to Samaria and Peter going to Lydia and Joppa and then to Antioch.

Saint Paul traveled more widely than the other disciples, undertaking three missionary journeys, each more extensive than the previous one, and then a final journey to Rome to join Peter.

Today's reading is from Saint Paul's first missionary journey.

14 They [Paul and Barnabas] continued on from Perga and reached Antioch in Pisidia. On the sabbath they entered (into) the synagogue and took their seats.

This event takes place in the middle of Saint Paul's first missionary journey.

The intervening verses between 14 and 43 constitute an example of the kind of preaching which Saint Paul did after his conversion. The first century synagogue service consisted of prayer, readings from scripture, the singing of psalms, and a teaching (homily/sermon) about the meaning of the scripture. As we know from Acts 2:46 the apostles attended Jewish services and then celebrated the Eucharist. The Liturgy of the Word is patterned after the synagogue service and is followed by the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Saint Paul and his associates thought of themselves as Jews announcing the messianic salvation of Israel, and they abandoned the synagogues only when the Jews repudiated them.

We will read the intervening verses in order to establish the setting for today's reading.

15 After the reading of the law and the prophets, the synagogue officials sent word to them, "My brothers, if one of you has a word of exhortation for the people, please speak." 16 So Paul got up, motioned with his hand, and said, "Fellow Israelites and you others who are God-fearing, listen. 17 The God of this people Israel chose our

ancestors and exalted the people during their sojourn in the land of Egypt. With uplifted arm he led them out of it ¹⁸ and for about forty years he put up with them in the desert. ¹⁹ When he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance ²⁰ at the end of about four hundred and fifty years. After these things he provided judges up to Samuel (the) prophet. ²¹ Then they asked for a king. God gave them Saul, son of Kish, a man from the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. ²² Then he removed him and raised up David as their king; of him he testified, 'I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will carry out my every wish.' ²³ From this man's descendants God, according to his promise, has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus. ²⁴ John heralded his coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel; ²⁵ and as John was completing his course, he would say, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.' ²⁶ **My brothers, children of the family of Abraham, and those others among you who are God-fearing, to us this word of salvation has been sent. ²⁷ The inhabitants of Jerusalem and their leaders failed to recognize him, and by condemning him they fulfilled the oracles of the prophets that are read sabbath after sabbath. ²⁸ For even though they found no grounds for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him put to death, ²⁹ and when they had accomplished all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and placed him in a tomb. ³⁰ But God raised him from the dead, ³¹ and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. These are (now) his witnesses before the people. ³² We ourselves are proclaiming this good news to you that what God promised our ancestors ³³ he has brought to fulfillment for us, (their) children, by raising up Jesus, as it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my son; this day I have begotten you.' ³⁴ And that he raised him from the dead never to return to corruption he declared in this way, 'I shall give you the benefits assured to David.' ³⁵ That is why he also says in another psalm, 'You will not suffer your holy one to see corruption.' ³⁶ Now David, after he had served the will of God in his lifetime, fell asleep, was gathered to his ancestors, and did see corruption. ³⁷ But the one whom God raised up did not see corruption. ³⁸ You must know, my brothers, that through him forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, (and) in regard to everything from which you could not be justified under the law of Moses, ³⁹ in him every believer is justified. ⁴⁰ Be careful, then, that what was said in the prophets not come about: ⁴¹ 'Look on, you scoffers, be amazed and disappear. For I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will never believe even if someone tells you.'" ⁴² As they were leaving, they invited them to speak on these subjects the following sabbath. ⁴³ After the congregation had dispersed,**

And now back to the reading.

[M]any Jews and worshipers who were converts to Judaism

Gentiles who, won by Jewish missionary efforts, had submitted to circumcision.

followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to remain faithful to

the grace of God. ⁴⁴ On the following sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

Contrast the widespread enthusiasm of the populace at large with the jealousy of the Jews. Antioch was primarily a Gentile city.

⁴⁵ When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and with violent abuse contradicted what Paul said.

Paul's first address was to the Jews who had invited him back the following week. When he returns, his following is no longer only Jews.

⁴⁶ Both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first,

To the Jews.

but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life,

He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Luke 10:16).

we now turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.'"

This quotation is of the Septuagint version of Isaiah 49:6 and is part of a servant song. This associates Paul as a missionary with the Servant of Yahweh, his preaching of the Word is to be an illumination for the Gentiles.

⁴⁸ The Gentiles were delighted when they heard this and glorified the word of the Lord. All who were destined for eternal life came to believe, ⁴⁹ and the word of the Lord continued to spread through the whole region. ⁵⁰ The Jews, however, incited the women of prominence who were worshipers and the leading men of the city, stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their territory.

The beatitudes: "*Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account*" (Matthew 5:11). One of the rewards of discipleship is persecution (Mark 10:30). The message of Christ is getting through.

⁵¹ So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium.

"If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town" (Matthew 10:14). Shaking the dust expresses complete dissociation. "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next" (Matthew 10:23).

52 The disciples were filled with joy and the holy Spirit.

2nd Reading - Revelation 7:9, 14-17

Last week we heard Saint John describing his vision of the heavenly liturgy where he saw the Lamb of God in the Holy of Holies in His perpetual offering to God, the heavenly offering of Jesus Himself which we join at every Mass. Today we join Saint John as he again views this heavenly liturgy and describes the Church in heaven (what we call the Church Triumphant) as it glorifies God.

9 [] I [John] had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue.

Like the crowd described last week, this is an innumerably large crowd from all nations. This huge crowd contrasts with the 144,000 from the people of Israel described in verses 1-8. The 144,000 may represent a select group within this large body, those of the Old Covenant (12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel). This may also be an allusion to the promise made to Abraham (Genesis 15:5).

They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes

A symbol of the glorified body of the righteous dead.

and holding palm branches in their hands.

A sign of victory and of the thanksgiving of the elect (1 Maccabees 13:51; 2 Maccabees 10:7).

[Then one of the elders] ^{14b} said to me, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress;

The crisis which involves persecution for the faithful; the time of which Jesus warned when He spoke to the disciples on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24:21; Mark 13:19) – a tribulation that He stated would take place during the then-existing generation (Matthew 24:34; Mark 13:30; Luke 21:32).

they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The transformation of a person from soiled (sinful) to clean (holy) is closely related to the death of Jesus understood as a sacrifice. Repentance, conversion, and baptism begin the transformation of a human being, perseverance had led to their reward. What follows is a poetic description of salvation.

¹⁵ “For this reason they stand before God’s throne

The greatest blessing is to be in God’s presence.

and worship him day and night in his temple.

Symbolizes closeness to God; ceaselessly celebrating a celestial liturgy (see 1 Chronicles 9:33; 23:30; Psalm 134:1). The whole of God’s holy people shares in His worship.

The one who sits on the throne will shelter them. ¹⁶ They will not hunger or thirst anymore, nor will the sun or any heat strike them. ¹⁷ For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them

Heavenly happiness is described in a series of Old Testament expressions: Psalm 23; 80:2; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:23; John 10:11-16.

and lead them

Heavenly happiness is described in a series of Old Testament expressions: Exodus 15:13; Deuteronomy 1:33; Psalm 5:9; 86:11; Wisdom 9:11.

to springs of life-giving water,

Heavenly happiness is described in a series of Old Testament expressions: Jeremiah 2:13; Psalm 35:10.

and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Isaiah 25:8

Gospel - John 10:27-30

This Sunday is often called “Good Shepherd Sunday.” In ancient times in Palestine, sheep and goats were raised for wool and milk, and usually not for meat. The sheep were somewhat like our pets to the shepherd. He could call them with a distinctive whistle or voice and they would come for him and him only. The shepherd provided everything for the sheep: food, water, protection, assurance. The sheep were not herded or driven, they were led. The shepherd would start out and call them, and they followed.

The setting for today’s reading is the Feast of the Dedication (Hanukkah) and Jesus is within the temple precincts (Solomon’s porch) and is addressing the people of Jerusalem. The people have asked Him to speak plainly and answer the question “Are you the Messiah?”. Jesus then answered “I told you and you do not believe. The works I do in my Father’s name testify to me. But you do not believe, because you are not among my sheep.”

27 My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life,

The pasturage to which He leads His sheep.

and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand.

Because He is the true shepherd to whom the sheep have been given by the Father as we hear in the next verse.

29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all,

It is impossible that Jesus should lose the sheep that have been given to Him by the Father since the Father's omnipotence is the guarantee of the gift.

and no one can take them out of the Father's hand. 30 The Father and I are one."

The Father and Son are one in mind, will, and action. Jesus does not say merely that He and the Father are "at one" but that they are "one thing". This is one of Jesus' hard sayings which provokes the wrath of the Jews as we hear in the next verse "*The Jews again* (the first time was in John 8:59) *picked up rocks to stone Him.*"