

the Sunday Readings



Paul and Barnabas put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith. "We all have to experience many hardships, before we enter the realm of God." (Acts 14:22)

5th Sunday of Easter (c)

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Life in the Spirit/spirit of Jesus (continued):

learn to be fully human¹

introduction

The last verses of John's eleventh chapter mark the beginning of Jesus going up to Jerusalem. Jesus knows that he will meet death there. That awareness troubles his disciples too. Jesus asks them to deepen their faith, *"in the hour of trial."* Believing in Jesus is believing in God. Jesus assures the disciples that they will indeed dwell in the Father's house. He has shown them *'the Way'*, but it isn't easy to understand his teaching. Thomas has his doubts and his question prompts a profoundly revealing answer from Jesus: *"I am the Way and the Truth and the Life"*.² Jesus said that he came to free people from death. In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of, *"a revelation of the glory of God"* in his dying! The news of the historical reality was presented by Jesus, bluntly, in a hardly user-friendly way. Now Jesus' followers announce that in the resurrection of Jesus, God has overcome the power and the threat posed by death. They use the same blunt language as Jesus.

first reading: Acts 14:21–27³

[The return to Antioch in Syria]

Paul and Barnabas went back through Lystra and Iconium to Antioch.(21) They put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith. "We all have to experience many hardships," they said, "before we enter the realm of God"(22) In each of these Churches they appointed elders, and with prayer and fasting they commended them to the Risen Christ in whom they had come to believe.(23) They passed through Pisidia and reached Pamphylia.(24) Then after proclaiming the WORD at Perga they went down to Attalia(25) and from there sailed for Antioch, where they had originally been commended to the grace of God for the work they

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- 1 Cover image: Barnabas and Paul – both exemplars of *'the Way'* of Jesus. Especially Barnabas who is responsible for removing the cloud of suspicion about Paul's initial motives, and assures other disciples of Paul's authentic conversion to the Way of Jesus.
 - 2 *The Way of Life . . . in the Spirit of Jesus*: The expression: *'Life in the Spirit/spirit'* is written in this way, to indicate the intimate harmony between *the Spirit of God* and *the human spirit informed by God*. It applies to the empowering that results from Jesus' apprenticing disciples with *his spirit*, or *power for life-giving*. As he is empowered by *God's holy Spirit*, his disciples assimilated *his spirit/Spirit* and they go on to accomplish in their practise (cf. *Book of Acts*), the empowering for life-giving which Jesus exhibited in his practise. Jesus needed his circle of disciples to extend the transformative power of *God's holy Spirit* by their practise. As disciples we either find the power of *God's Spirit* moving within our own story and we harness our personal powers with God's, or we are stumbling blocks to that movement. There's pain and sweat and occasional failure. But this is the stuff out of which transformation takes place. It's the ground of our profoundest hopes for our world. The readings of the Easter Season extend our memory and encourage our reflection in the light of the new crucifixions and resurrections we experience. We extend this transformation to the character and instincts of our modern culture. We act in the light of Jesus' powerful practise. For those of us with the eyes of faith to see and decide; this is *living in the spirit/Spirit of Jesus!*
 - 3 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

had now completed.(26) On their arrival they assembled the church and gave an account of all that God had done with them, and how the door of faith had been opened to the gentiles.(27)

Acts tells that Paul and Barnabus are forced to leave Antioch in Pisidia. In Derbe their opponents seem to have run out of steam and they make many new disciples before returning to some persecuted communities that needed encouragement. Paul often started delivering his message in a city or town and wasn't allowed to finish. Starting in the synagogue, division would grow between *the Israelites* and *God-fearing non-Israelites* on hearing his message. Then the apostle would be opposed and the opposition's persecution would often carry over, from one city to the next (v.19). But at Derbe there's no mention of the Jews. The opposition seems to have spent its force by this time. The missionaries are successful in making many disciples and they retrace their steps to places where they had recently been opposed and they encourage their recent converts in those places.

Dogged by persecution earlier in this missionary journey, Paul's work in any one place was too brief to expect the communities of disciples to last. But groups did survive in spite of the unfavourable circumstances at the time of their founding by Paul. The evidence is found in the letters Paul addresses to the Thessalonians and the Philippians. The two apostles tried to strengthen the groups of their converts in the light of what they had experienced; that the way to the reigning of God leads through persecution and trouble. The non-Israelite Christians would come to suffer much as the Israelite Christians had before them. According to Paul, suffering is the way to glory and is the pattern established by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Before leaving Antioch the itinerant apostles installed a group of elders to guide the local community in their absence. These prepared for their role by joining the apostles in prayer and fasting. The elders played a significant role in Jewish communities. They continued that role when a community became Christian. The non-Israelite Christian communities were organised along lines that sprang from the social organisation of Israelite life.⁴ Later these elders would take on many of the roles and functions of *the order of presbyter*. It is an important link in the history of the evolution of the modern role of priest.

response: Psalm 145 : 8 – 13

[the greatness and the goodness of God]

*Our God is kind and full of compassion,
slow to anger, abounding in love.(8)
How good is our God to all,
compassionate to all creatures.(9)*

4 [v.23] *They appointed elders*: the communities are given their own religious leaders by the traveling missionaries. The structure in these churches is patterned on the model of the Jerusalem community (see Ac.11:30; 15:2, 5, 22; 21:18).

*All Your creatures shall thank You, O God
and Your friends shall repeat their blessing.(10)
They shall speak of the glory
of Your reign and declare Your might, O God,(11)
to make known to all Your mighty deeds
and the glorious splendour of Your reign.(12)
Yours is an everlasting reign;
Your rule lasts from age to age.(13a)*

The speaker expresses Israelite joy and confidence in the Creator. What is lastingly true in the world is that the Lord God securely reigns. The Lord is: good, merciful, slow to anger and kind. These qualities affect all the Lord God's relationships. The speaker asserts the Lord's free, passionate and limitless self-giving to the covenant partner. The covenant partner here is the whole created world! Creation holds together because of God's faithfulness. This judgement about the reigning of the Lord God is made out of experience of the daily reliability evidenced from the simple facts of being nourished and having the necessities of life provided.

The pattern of authentic living reflects the Lord's *power for life-giving* and evokes a response of '*child-like trust*' in the reliability of that life. This quality evokes gratitude by telling of the Lord's deeds. All must know of God's reigning (v.10). The speaker celebrates the order in God's creation; it surprises and gives unwarranted gifts to unlikely creatures. God's power mobilises to care for the otherwise uncared for. The appropriate community response is: "*We will praise Your name forever, our Ruler and our God*".

second reading: Revelation 21 : 1 – 5⁵

[the new Heaven and the new Earth]

Then I, John, saw a new Heaven and a new Earth; the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.(1) I saw the holy city and the new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, beautiful as a bride and groom on their wedding day.(2) Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, "You see this city? Here God lives among humankind. God will dwell with them as their God. They will be God's people, and God will be with them;(3) God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone."(4) Then the One sitting on the throne spoke: "Now I am making the whole of creation new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."(5)

The passage from the final part of *the Book of Revelation* is dedicated to describing the new ordering which takes the place of the old ordering that has come to an end. The positive effect produced by the death of Jesus is the

⁵ *Revelation 21:1- 22:5* is a description of God's eternal reigning in heaven under the symbols of a new Heaven and a new Earth; cf *Is.65:17-25; 66:22; Mt.19:28.*

restoration of the interrupted relationship between God and humankind that gives access to divine life. Until now the Seer has been stressing the effects of the judgement of God upon the world. The basic positive effect which the death of Christ has produced, is the restoration of the interrupted relationship between God and humankind giving back to people the possibility of access to divine life. This is '*good news*' which Jesus came to bring. The proclamation of this reality in the early Christian community produced the Christian Scriptures.

The Seer believed the person and work of Jesus was the fulfillment of all that had been announced in the Israelite prophetic tradition. One of the main features of that tradition, especially after the Babylonian exile, was the return and the restoration of Jerusalem and its Temple. The author presents Jesus as the promised and expected Messiah and saw the restoration of Jerusalem as the climax of messianic expectations. There's a line of continuity between the new reality and the old. The Seer's new Heaven and the new Earth are reminiscent of *Isaiah*.⁶ Jerusalem began with good intentions, but lost its way by forgetting the mandate it had to care for the powerless and is punished.⁷ In the end, after the hurt and after the city is plowed as a field, it will become a place of humaneness, caring for widows and orphans.⁸ The city will be what it was initially summoned by the Lord to be. When the social arrangements are transformed, the land will be healed and its people with it.⁹

The prophet Isaiah has God promising a new Jerusalem. The poem describes the new city. It has a new economics. No-one will plant and someone else eat the produce. There will be a new medical policy. There will be no more infant mortality. There will be a new covenantal religion. God will answer before the people call. In this new city there will be no more cries of distress, no more abandonment, no more terror. There will be well-being in the city, for it is promised.¹⁰ The prophetic vision of Isaiah is taken up by the Seer. The heavenly chorus shouts: "*The reign of the world has become the reigning of our Lord and his Christ; he will reign for ever and ever!*"¹¹

The new creation of Heaven and Earth corresponds to the story in Genesis as a preliminary to the creation of humankind.¹² Here too the new creation is only a first moment in the divine intervention which creates the whole of reality, "*Look, I am making the whole of creation new*" (v.5) serves the new creation of humankind (vv.6-7). The new creation is the completion of the first creation. The restored city becomes the place where God dwells. The ancient covenant of mutual presence

6 *Is.*65:17-19 & 66:22

7 *Is.*1:24-26

8 *Is.*1:26-27

9 *Is.*65:17-25

10 *Is.*65:19-22

11 *Rv.*11:15 NJB

12 Cf. *Gn.*1.1ff

between God and God's people is fulfilled and forever assured as a covenant of peace and happiness. God orders the author to write the vision to encourage those whose lives are still enmeshed in history's struggle.

gospel reading: John 13: 31–35

[the New Commandment]

When Judas had gone, Jesus said, "Now has the Promised One been glorified, and in this One, God has been glorified.(31) If God has been glorified in this Promised One, God will in turn glorify Him in God's own glory and will do so very soon. My friends, I shall not be with you much longer. You will look for me, and, as I told the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'(33) I give you a new commandment: love one another; just as I have loved you, you also must love one another.(34) By this love you have for one another, everyone will know that you are my disciples."(35)

The reading from John's gospel begins the so-called "*Book of Glory*." *The Book of Glory* includes: an introduction; Jesus' supper talk; and the passion/glorification story.¹³ The reading is the second of two insertions in the introduction. The first follows the washing of the disciples' feet and announces Jesus' passion. This second insertion follows the account of Judas' betrayal and reinforces the message to imitate Jesus' practice of loving.

The context of Jesus' farewell talk is the last meal he had with his disciples before his passion. The narrative offers Jesus an opportunity to address future generations of disciples about *life in his Spirit/spirit* after his passion/glorification. Jesus announces that his glory begins to be revealed (v.31). The glory will be his death! Jesus has also said earlier that he had come to free people from death. That's why John speaks of the revelation of *the glory of God* in Jesus' death when he spoke of his death. In the Israelite Scriptures '*the glory of God*' is the same as the '*liberating victory of God*'. When Jesus speaks about his 'death' he is talking about a '*liberation of God*'.

Then Jesus gives a new commandment (v.34).¹⁴ His disciples are to model their practice on his practice. Their practice of loving becomes a sign they are living his Spirit/spirit. In saying farewell to his disciples, Jesus is telling them that we must look for him – not in where he is going, but in communal love. "*Look for Me where you are going to find me; love one another.*" Jesus' commandment is in direct continuity with the commandments like: "*love your neighbour as you love yourself.*" That commandment summed up the covenant responsibilities expressed in *the Torah of Moses* and *the message of the Prophets*. With this commandment, society hadn't been transformed; slavery hadn't been abolished; injustices and cruelties

¹³ *John 13:1-19 - 19:42 The Book of Glory*: there's a major break here; the word '*sign*' is used again only in *Jn.20:30*. In this phase of Jesus' return to the Father, the discourses (*Jn.13-17*) precede the traditional narrative of the passion (*Jn.18-20*) to interpret them for the Christian reader. This is the only extended example of esoteric teaching of disciples in John.

¹⁴ [v.34] *I give you a new commandment*: this puts Jesus on a par with the Lord God. The commandment itself is not new; cf *Lv.19:18*

had continued. Jesus' commandment is different. Its not just a religious precept as the Israelites understood the commandments. Jesus' commandment is a new social reality. On calling this a, '*new commandment*' Jesus is saying that his commandment is a new command to love. Love is as old as the creation of the world. The evangelist says the same thing in his first letter.¹⁵

The commandment of Jesus inspires a new understanding that binds Christian disciples to a new second phase of covenant responsibility. People have always destroyed the community of humanity through greed for money, power, and access to money and power. Jesus is saying that he came to die for the sake of that communal love and he gives a new commandment for people to really bring about that loving. Jesus (the WORD of God) is saying that God's WORD is – that God loves us and we must have mutual love of one another! God's love of us is the love that is to exist among disciples. Jesus comes to communicate this mutual love. He incarnates the commandment. The mutual love of one another means putting his WORD (new commandment) into practise; the very meaning of being Jesus' disciple.

for sharing:¹⁶

- *Christian leaders are drawn from the community and prepared for their role of service, by prayer and fasting. Comment on Acts 14: 21 – 27*
- *Acceptance of our responsibility to extend Christ's work in history, pre-supposes we have come to terms with his departure from it. We don't spend our time trying to restore a time which is past. Comment on Revelation 21: 1 – 5*
- *Mutual love is the sign of true Christian discipleship. It is a sacramental expression of God's own love for people. Comment on John 13: 31 – 35*

15 Cf. 1 Jn.2:8

16 Lectio Divina; reading God's WORD in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio* (reading) – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio* (reflection) – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio* (prayer) – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio* (rest) – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: '*Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them*'.

prayer:¹⁷

*We behold Your glory, O God,
in the love shown by Your Son,
lifted up on the cross
and exalted on high.
Increase our love for one another,
that both in name and in truth
we may be disciples of the risen Lord Jesus
and so reflect by our lives
the glory that is Yours.
Grant this through Jesus Christ,
the firstborn from the dead,
who lives and reigns with You,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, now and always. Amen.*

review:¹⁸

The gift of a new commandment by Jesus to his disciples is a threshold moment in the life of the Christian community. The gift isn't forced. Would-be disciples are invited to share the unfinished work of practising the 'Way of Jesus'. Only the receivers of the gift can determine the extent they permit the new awareness to subvert their old ways of living and how these might change.

The Eucharistic liturgy and its presenters provide the material for subversion. But permission to subvert belongs to the hearers of the liturgical texts. This precious moment must be hosted with patient awe. It makes serious transformations possible.

Christian disciples cannot know Jesus apart from his story – its a narrative that concerns the social, economic and political reality. All is transformed by the power of God's intrusion into the story. That's what the resurrection signifies.

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17 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

18 Review of the Week – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the WORD and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.