

Commentary to the 5th Sunday of Easter – Year A –

Only one life but so many ways to offer it

Introduction



One of the characteristics of the primitive community described in the Acts of the Apostles is the absence of classes, titles, honorifics, greater prestige or recognized dignity of some eminent member.

All believers are considered on a level of equality. No one would be called rabbi because there was only one Master and they were only disciples. They felt themselves brothers and no one claimed the title of father. They knew the fact of having one Father in heaven (Mt 23:8-10).

They neither knew degrees in terms of holiness. “Saints” was the collective title which they were fond of calling themselves. Paul addresses his letter “to the saints in Philippi... “ (Phil 1:1), “to the saints in Ephesus” (Eph 1:1) “to all of you, the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy” (Rom 1:7).

Yet a difference was recognized and held in high esteem: that of the ministry of service that each was called to play in favor of the brothers and sisters.

The only Spirit—Paul reminds the Corinthians—enriches the community with diverse and complementary gifts: “to one he gives the language of science, to another that of wisdom, to another faith, to another the gift of healing. Another works miracles, another speaks in tongues and still, another interprets “all for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7-11).

Peter recommended to “serve one another with the gifts each of you received thus becoming good managers of the varied graces of God” (1 Pt 4:10). With this ministerial church, “whose cornerstone is Christ and whose foundations are the apostles” (Eph 2:20), our current communities are called to

confront themselves.

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Let not the gifts that you have given swell us with pride, but the will to serve the brethren.”

-----1st Reading | 2nd Reading |
Gospel-----

First reading: Acts 6:1-6

The passages of the Acts of the Apostles evoke an enchanting feeling. In it, Luke tells the memorable story of the first community of Jerusalem. The disciples were of one heart and mind. They participated daily in the catechesis of the Apostles, shared goods, prayed together, celebrated the Eucharist weekly and were making extraordinary signs by the power of the Spirit. A perfect harmony reigned among them and they enjoyed the esteem of all the people.

Was everything really going well in Jerusalem? Is not the author of the Acts of the Apostles a bit lulled in dreams? Has he not mistaken the ideal he had in mind with reality?

The answer is fairly easy and sure: he has transformed, idealized it without any shade of doubt. He was inspired by real events—the exceptional generosity of Barnabas (Acts 4:36-37), the radical change of feelings and relationships within the group of disciples after the resurrection of Christ—and generalized them to outline the image of a model Christian community.

The ecclesial reality, even in Jerusalem, was not so idyllic. Problems exist as in our communities. At one point they came to the surface, even dramatically. It is the story that we find in today’s reading.

The community was initially composed only of Jews but they belonged to two distinct groups: the Hebrews and the Hellenists.

The former were born and raised in Palestine. They spoke Aramaic and frequented the synagogues where the Bible was read in Hebrew. They were very much attached to the traditions of their fathers and the law of Moses. They accepted and considered indisputable all the teachings and interpretations given by the rabbis.

The Hellenists were born and raised abroad. By contact with other peoples they had known and appreciated, they also adopted lifestyles that their coreligionists considered misleading and corrupt. They felt free with regard to the traditions and rules of the rabbis. They did not understand Hebrew, spoke in Greek (the language then used throughout the empire). In their synagogues, they read the Bible in the Greek translation. This diversity of origin, language and mentality were the causes of tensions between the two groups.

One day the conflict erupted.

The occasion was caused by the problem of the distribution of the community's goods. The Hellenists who were in the minority began to complain because the Jews showed preferences. They favored their widows and neglected those of the other group.

The situation became explosive. The great sympathy that the disciples enjoyed in front of all the people risked being blurred.

The problem had to be solved. The apostles gathered and pointed to a possible solution: choose—they said—among you men who enjoy the esteem and confidence of all; they will be entrusted with the task of distributing goods to the poor, while we will devote ourselves to prayer and the proclamation of the gospel.

The proposal was accepted and the case was closed, to everyone's satisfaction.

The incident was inserted by Luke in the book of Acts to cast light on the problems of his community where dissensions, tensions, disagreements, lack of dialog existed alongside the many signs of new life.

Luke reveals himself, as always, an intelligent, optimistic and balanced person.

His story is an invitation to evaluate with realism, wisdom, and patience the real situations of each community.

The church—he wants to tell us—is not made up of angels, but of people with the mentality, culture, ideologies, different characters and many limitations. It is unfortunate and painful that prejudices, sectarianism, envy, jealousy, misunderstanding emerge inside it, but it's normal. It even happened in the community of Jerusalem where exceptional people, the apostles as well as Mary, the mother of the Lord, were present.

The community of Jerusalem got out of this “incident” maturely. It grew up, learned to solve their problems and found a way to respond to their growing needs. It became ministerial. The apostles were not the only ones to carry out all duties in it. Other capable people have assumed the responsibilities that were not the specific competence of the apostles.

Thus began what is now called the ministerial community. It is the community in which all members have equal dignity, where the only honorific title is that of “servant”. There everyone “according to the grace received” puts himself in service of others (1 Pt 4:10). “Those who have the gift of prophecy give the insight of faith, the minister fulfills his office, and the teachers teach, the one who encourages, convinces, who presides is dedicated and who does works of charity is cheerful” (Rom 12:6-8).

Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:4-9

Peter likens the church to a spiritual building whose builder is God and whose living stones are people.

The construction began with a solid rock as the foundation for the whole building: Christ on whom

God has also placed other stones, those who believed in him, those newly baptized spoken about by the author in the Easter Vigil. United to Jesus, they form a new, stunning temple (vv. 4-5).

The Old Testament (Ps 118:22) announced that one day God would take the stone which the builders rejected and would put it at the base of a new house (v. 6). The prophecy is fulfilled on the day of Passover. God chose Jesus, rejected by political and religious leaders of his people and placed him as the foundation of the new sanctuary.

The ancient temple of Jerusalem was built with material stones. It was a place where sacrifices of lambs and bulls were offered. This was replaced by a new temple wherein each one, together with Christ, immolates spiritual holocausts pleasing to God: the holy, blameless and a life filled with works of love. By offering these sacrifices, every disciple becomes, in baptism, priest.

In front of the neophytes, distinguished with a sublime dignity, the preacher is moved and exclaims: “Honour to you who believe!”; you have become “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God”; you are entrusted with the task of proclaiming, with your life, the wonderful works of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Then his face is sad. He thinks of those who refused the gift of God and have chosen to continue living as pagans. For them, the stone was not a source of salvation, but an occasion for stumbling. The conflict foretold by Simeon is verified: “He is established for the falling and rising of many, a sign of contradiction so that, out of many hearts, thoughts may be revealed” (Lk 2:34-35).

Gospel: John 14:1-12

The passage of today’s Gospel is taken from the first of three farewell speeches pronounced by Jesus at the Last Supper after Judas went out to implement his intention of treason. They are called so because in them Jesus seems to dictate his last will, before tackling the passion and death. The liturgy makes them ponder after Easter for a very simple reason: a testament opens and acquires its meaning only after the death of the person who dictated it. The words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper were not restricted to the apostles in the upper room but addressed to the disciples of all times. Easter is the most suitable time to understand and meditate on them.

The passage today begins with a phrase that could be misunderstood: “In my Father’s house there are many rooms; otherwise, I would not have told you that I go to prepare a place for you. After I have gone and prepared a place for you, I shall come again and take you to me. Yet you know the way where I am going” (vv. 2-4).

Jesus seems to be saying that the time for him to go to heaven has come. He promises that there he will prepare a place for his disciples. This explanation is unsatisfactory because we believe that everything is already set in heaven for a long time. Then the idea of the numbered seat, corresponding to the various degrees of reward, with the danger that someone might not also have a place to stay, does not enthuse at all.

The meaning of the sentence is different. It is much more concrete and relevant for us and for the life of our communities.

Jesus says he has to go through a difficult “path”. He adds that his disciples would have to know very well that “way” because he often spoke of it.

Thomas replies on behalf of all: we do not know this “way” and we cannot guess where you want to go.

Jesus explains: he himself will be the first to run the “way”. Once his mission is accomplished, he will be back and will take the disciples with him. He will infuse them with his courage and strength, so they will be enabled to follow in his footsteps.

What the “way” is, is now clear: It is the difficult path toward Easter. It demands the sacrifice of life. Jesus talked about it many times but the disciples were always reluctant to understand. When he insisted on the “gift of life”, they preferred to be distracted, thinking about something else.

In this perspective, the question about “the seats in the Father’s house” becomes clear. Who has agreed to follow the “way” traveled by Jesus, finds himself immediately in the kingdom of God, in the Father’s house? This house is not paradise, but the Christian community. There are many places, that is, many services, many tasks to be performed in it.

There are many ways in which the gift of one’s life takes form. The “many places” are nothing but the “various ministries”, the different situations in which everyone is required to make available to the brethren one’s own capacity, the many gifts received from God.

Until the Second Vatican Council, the laity were not considered active members of the church. They did not participate but “assisted” in the Eucharist; they did not celebrate reconciliation, they went to “receive” the absolution. They were often idle spectators of what the priests were doing. Today we understand that every Christian should be active, not for the shortage of priests, but for the fact that everyone has a job to do within the community.

Jesus says that in the course of the ministry, there could be no motives for envy and jealousy. The “places”, that is, the services to be rendered to the brethren are many. The only one who is not yet shaken by the newness of life, communicated by faith in the Risen Lord, may remain idle.

In civil society, the place is assessed on the basis of power, social prestige that confers, the money with which it is paid for. The question: “What do you do?” is equivalent to “How much do you earn?”

The place prepared by Jesus and for each is instead evaluated based on service: the better “place” is where one can serve more and better the brothers.

The passage is a call for verification of community life: what is the percentage of active members? Are there commitments that no one wants to take? Are there competitions to grab for oneself the responsibility of any assignment? Of the many “jobs” prepared by Jesus, are there still many undiscovered ones? Are there “unemployed” people? Why?

The second part of today's Gospel (vv. 8-12) is centered on the question of Philip: "Lord, show us the Father and that is enough."

"Let me see your glory," Moses asked the Lord, and God answered him: "You cannot see my face because man cannot see me and live" (Ex 33:18,20).

While conscious of this inability to contemplate the Lord, the pious Israelites continued to implore: "I seek your face, O Lord. Do not hide your face from me" (Ps 27:8-9); "My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When shall I go and see the face of God?" (Ps 42:3).

Philip seems to be an interpreter of this intimate yearning of the human heart. He knows that "no one has ever seen God" (Jn 1:18), because "he lives in unapproachable light and whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16); but also recalls the bliss reserved for the pure in heart: "for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8) and thinks that Jesus can satisfy his secret aspiration. He presents such a demand that seems to echo those expressed by Moses and by the psalmists.

In his response, Jesus shows the way to see God. One needs to look at him. He is the human face that God has taken to manifest himself, to establish a relationship of intimacy, friendship, communion of life with people. He is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), "the radiance of God's glory and bears the stamp of God's hidden being" (Heb 1:3).

To know the Father, there is no need to make arguments or reasoning. It is not worth it to get lost in inadequate philosophical investigations. It is sufficient to contemplate Jesus, to observe what he does, says, teaches how he behaves, loves, whom he prefers, attends to, caresses and from whom he lets himself be caressed, with whom he dines, he chooses, defends... because the Father does so. The works that Jesus fulfill are those of the Father (v.10).

There's a time when the Father fully revealed his face: on the cross. There he reveals his supreme love for people. The radiance of his glory fully appears (Heb 1:3). There his light shines in its fullness (2 Cor 4:6).

"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" Jesus affirms (v. 9). But this seeing is not reduced to the gaze of one who witnessed the events, the facts, the concrete gestures carried out by him. It is a gaze of faith that is required, a look that can go beyond appearances, beyond the purely material datum, a look that captures the revelation of God in the works of Jesus.

This seeing is equivalent to believing.

Who sees the Father in him, who grants him full confidence and is prepared to risk one's life on the values proposed by him, will do the same works and will do even greater ones. It is not about miracles, but the total gift of self for love.

The Father will continue to realize in the disciples the works of love that he has accomplished in Jesus.

See more at: <http://bibleclaret.org/celebrating-the-word-of-god#sthash.VuGCvK4M.dpuf>

Fr. Fernando Armellini - <http://bibleclaret.org>