

## **Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, May 19th 2017**

The opening prayer of today's Mass asks God to conform the Church to the paschal mystery of Christ. What does it mean for us who make up the Church to be conformed to the mission, death, and resurrection of Christ? How are we shaped into Christ, who himself was shaped into the Father's Will?

I took this question to prayer for some days to look more closely at the invitation of Christ made present in the Church's liturgical prayer. Several clues emerged from praying with the scripture texts assigned for today which are particularly relevant for the work that I do as the "Mission Officer" of a Catholic Jesuit University.

The first reading from Acts describes the outcome of a controversy in the early Church that seems to have arisen in Antioch of Syria around the evangelization work of Paul and his sidekick, Barnabas. These two preachers, mandated and sent (that is, missioned) by the Jerusalem Church had been followed by several members of the Jerusalem Church who were not officially sent by the community. These self-appointed preachers wanted a stricter adherence to the Jewish Code of Law from the followers of Jesus than Paul or Barnabas had required. This confused the new converts.

Paul, by the way, truly understood that if Jesus is the promised Messiah, then all things of God were subject to Jesus and to His interpretation. Jesus' life would become the measure of true belief in God's plan of salvation for humanity and all creation. Furthermore, those who follow God's plan in Jesus are not just individually acknowledging God's stated intention, they are drawn into Jesus' life in a way that participates in the Trinity of Love. The scope of this awareness is one of the reasons Paul originally resisted the Apostolic evangelization until the Risen Jesus confronted Him directly on the road to Damascus.

There, in the heart of his resistance, Paul faced the Risen Lord and knew the truth of his own longing for God fulfilled. There he was called to become a most worthy spokesperson for Jesus – a member of Jesus' body who grasped the meaning of being conformed to the Paschal Mystery. Paul understood that God became human in Jesus so that humans could be divinized in Jesus the Christ. This is a mystery so astounding that it takes the intervention of the Holy Spirit to realize (that is, make it real). No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except through the Spirit of God working in her or him.

The first reading tells us that to be conformed into the Christ we must belong to the Church in intention and practice. We need to be incorporated into the Body that Jesus chose to hand on his Spirit to. That body missions its spokespersons, so that the mystery is not distorted or misinterpreted.

The Gospel goes further and says we must not only be in the Church, we must love the members of the community as much as Jesus loves each one of us. We who assert we are Jesus followers must love one another – that is the sign by which we will be recognized as conformed to the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. John's version of the Good News, further states that we can't choose to be followers of Jesus ourselves. We must first be invited to become members of the body, and when we are invited and say "yes," we are no longer merely servants, we are intimate friends – so intimate that the love among us reflects the love of the persons of the Trinity for each other. It is the Spirit that makes this possible.

At this end of the Easter Season we begin to focus more closely on the work of the Spirit. We begin asking God, the creator, to send the Spirit through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, into our lives and conform us to the shape and intention of the Body of the Risen Christ. This conformation will mean that "we" appreciate the implications of the first-person plural. It will mean that like Paul and Barnabas, Silas and Judas, we will be sent to go and bear fruit that will last. We will be mandated by Christ the head, and by His Body the Church to bring others to life who are dead in their own hopelessness and sin.

What it means to us in our daily life is that we look at every other Christian as a dear brother or sister, to be loved and cared for. It further means that we suffer our human sufferings for the sake of the work of Christ, not with complaint and anger, but with patience and gentle compassion. It also means that our lives are marked by an astonishing joy – even amid suffering and loss. Pope Francis has frequently reminded the Church that the sign of God's reign, "on earth as it is in heaven" is spiritual consolation – a phrase that St. Ignatius also identified as the mark of the Christian life. Even in the worst moments of any day or week or lifetime, the presence of God brings charity, joy, peace, patience, humor, kindness, and a host of other wonderful gifts.

The invitation of the end of the Easter Season that we are moving toward is this: 'WE together' are conformed, by God's Spirit, into Christ's Body the Church and we will live in joy NOW and forever. I want this for myself, I want this for my world; God grant me the grace to labor for it with my present, and my last, breath of life.

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