

Third Sunday of Easter (Year C): The Effects of Jesus' Resurrection.

First Reading: Acts 5:27-32+40-41: Peter & others suffer for preaching;

Second Reading: Apocalypse 5:11-14: Vision of the Lamb (Jesus) in glory;

Gospel: John 21:1-14 (short) 1-19 (full): Jesus appears in Galilee.

One of the most difficult things to get right is the relationship between the Church and the state: Sometimes the two are too closely bound together – this was perhaps the Church of England's situation after the Reformation (when Henry VIII effectively 'nationalized' it, making it almost another government department), and the RC Church's situation in "Catholic" countries such as Franco's Spain and Mussolini's Italy. At other times, there was an ongoing conflict between the two – eg, churches in Eastern Europe in Communist days.

I mention this because it helps us understand better the first reading, when Peter and other apostles had a major dispute with the Jewish High Priest, and their religion's ruling council, the Sanhedrin. Most Jews saw this body as the divinely-inspired authority for both religious & civil life. At the time, Peter and the others still felt themselves to be part of the Jewish system, so any dispute with the High Priest & his Council was serious. Nonetheless, Peter was able to refuse their demand to stop preaching the Risen Jesus; he said, "Obedience to God comes before obedience to men. We are witnesses (to the resurrection), we and the Holy Spirit, given by God to those who obey him." The result? The apostles were flogged, and warned not to continue preaching.

Their refusal to obey the Jewish Sanhedrin (Council) shows just how certain their faith was. Our society often mocks religious conviction, arguing that it leads to fundamentalism (ie, extremism) and intolerance. But without great religious fervour, the Christian Church would never have been established. The Acts of the Apostles shows just how finely balanced the Church's survival was: the Sanhedrin had wanted rid of it, and Saul of Tarsus was a young, zealous official who tried to achieve this. Renamed Paul, his conversion to the faith came in time to save the scattered groups of Christians, and establish them on a firm, organized footing, with a deep theological base. Within a few years, Christianity did break away socially from Judaism, but without severing its intimate theological & moral link with it. This separation was not easy: in Romans 9:1-5, St Paul shows how emotionally upset it made him. Later, he hoped for future reconciliation with Judaism (Rom. 11). Sadly, it was not to be.

The last chapters of each gospel show how Jesus' resurrection appearances gave the apostles this strong belief that he was alive. Later, boosted by the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they were willing and able to go against the orders of their 'official' religious authorities. This Sunday's gospel shows one memorable experience they had of Jesus, back up north - in Galilee.

John 21 is like an appendix to the gospel, which was clearly meant to finish at 20:30-31. The reason for their return to Galilee? – simply the need to make some money by their old trade – fishing! (Who says that religion and ordinary life don't mix?) The story is quite simple and very readable (hint – please do read it!) but it stresses a couple of important points. First, the risen Christ was not immediately recognizable – there had been a definite change in appearance. Second, his new life had a genuinely physical side to it – he wasn't just a 'ghost' or purely spiritual phenomenon. (This was seen in his preparing breakfast for them.) Later, Peter & the others would emphasise the physical nature of their experiences of the risen Christ.

The full version of this gospel also gives Jesus' commission to Peter. Quizzed by Jesus three times if he loved him (to match the three times he had earlier denied to a servant-girl that he even knew Jesus), he was told to "feed" Jesus' "lambs and sheep". This is the origin of Peter's role as "Shepherd of all Christians" – a title inherited by his successors as Bishops of Rome. Also mentioned is the fact that Peter would face suffering in later life. By the time John 21 was written, his martyrdom was already part of Christian history.

How does this help us? I suggest two ideas. The first is that the Church must stay true to its core beliefs & principles – whatever local or national governments may say. The Church cannot afford to get too close to civil power, if it wishes to be an independent 'prophet' of the truth. This can cost a lot – be it the persecution of church leaders, or ordinary church members losing their money, social status, and so on. 'Martyrdom' means bearing public witness to the truth, not just being put to death for it, and this can be uncomfortable for us. My second idea is that we need to strengthen our personal faith in the risen Lord, by occasionally thinking & praying about events like this Sunday's gospel. This will remind us that our faith is that of the apostles themselves. Their road to full belief was bumpy & confusing, and I find that a great comfort. *Fr Jim Dunne.*