

6th Sunday of Easter – Cycle A

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 8:5-8, 14-17

Last week we heard of the ordination of seven men as “assistants”: those who are to serve. In the intervening chapter (chapter 7) which comes between last week’s reading and this one, one of these assistants, Stephen by name, is martyred. The charges against him resemble those leveled against Jesus: (1) he has uttered blasphemies against Moses and God; (2) he has spoken against the Jerusalem temple and the Law; (3) he has maintained that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the temple and change Mosaic customs.

In his speech to the Sanhedrin, the longest speech in the book of Acts, Stephen doesn’t directly answer the charges against him but instead delivers a sermon in which the history of Israel from Abraham to Solomon is recast in terms of opposition to Jesus – the history of the Jewish people has always been one of opposition to God’s appointed guides and of idolatry. The result is that Stephen is dragged outside the city and stoned; with those who are doing the stoning having their garments watched by a young Pharisee named Saul.

Thus began the persecution of the Church in Jerusalem; this leads to the spread of the Word from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria under the influence of the Hellenists. Although the twelve are still the nerve center of Christianity in Jerusalem, others are now also spreading the Word. Today we hear the story of Philip, another of the seven assistants.

⁵ Thus Philip went down to (the) city of Samaria

A more commonly accepted translation is “a town of Samaria”. Since this episode concerns the evangelization of the Samaritans, the specific city is unimportant.

and proclaimed the Messiah to them.

The Samaritans were regarded as holding unorthodox views by the Jews. Nevertheless, they did share with them a belief in the coming of a Messianic figure, the “Returning One”.

⁶ With one accord, the crowds paid attention to what was said by Philip when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing.

Even one of the assistants performs the miracles that Jesus promised his disciples would work (see Mark 16:17).

⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice, came out of many possessed people,

and many paralyzed and crippled people were cured. ⁸ There was great joy in that city. ¹⁴ Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John,

Two of the twelve are sent from the mother Church in Jerusalem to incorporate the Samaritan community into the greater body of the Church.

¹⁵ who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit, ¹⁶ for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

This is not to infer that their baptism was not a sacramental one, but points out the difference between baptism and confirmation. Note that the two apostles do not re-baptize but confirm. The distinction implied here between baptism and receipt of the Holy Spirit has always posed a problem for interpreters. It is no doubt a device used by Saint Luke to insist that the gift of the Spirit comes through the Church, represented by the college of the twelve in Jerusalem. Recall that Samaritans and Jews had nothing to do with each other; yet here are the apostles ministering to the Samaritans.

¹⁷ Then they laid hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit.

This passage bears witness to the existence of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit (confirmation) as two distinct sacramental rites. The most important effects Christian baptism have are the infusion of initial grace and the remission of original sin and any personal sin; it is the first sacrament one receives, which is why it is called the “door of the Church”. There is a close connection between baptism and confirmation, so much so that in the early centuries of Christianity, confirmation was administered immediately after baptism.

2nd Reading - 1 Peter 3:15-18

Having heard in the introduction to our first reading about the start of the persecutions of the Christian Church, we now hear Saint Peter tell us the Christian approach to persecution.

¹⁵ [S]anctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.

The Lord of Isaiah 8:13 is God; here the title is applied to Christ.

Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope,

Not just a conviction about future expectations, but the very essence of the motivation of the new people of God, the Christians. We have an imperishable and undefiled inheritance as we heard in 1 Peter 1:4 (2nd Sunday of Easter, Cycle A).

“We must be so well instructed in the knowledge of our faith that whenever anyone asks us about it we may be able to give them a proper answer and to do so with meekness and in the fear of God. For whoever says anything about God must do so as if God Himself were present to hear him.” [Didymus the Blind (ca. 381), *Catena*]

16 but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame.

“Act in such a way that those who revile you because they cannot see your faith and your hope for a heavenly reward may see your good works and be put to shame by them, because they cannot deny that what you are doing is good. For it is quite certain, my brothers, that those who despise your good behavior will be put to shame when the last judgment comes and they see you crowned along with Christ, while they are condemned along with the devil.” [Saint Bede the Venerable (ca. A.D. 416), *On 1 Peter*]

17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that be the will of God, than for doing evil.

Two weeks ago (4th Sunday of Easter, Cycle A), we heard this applied to slaves; now it is made more general.

18 For Christ also suffered for sins once,

Peter proposes Christ’s example as a motive of patience in the persecution – but he also emphasizes the unique character of His death, in view of man’s redemption.

the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous,

“The righteous” is the early Church’s descriptive term for Jesus.

that he might lead you to God.

Christ’s death was not only a model, but gave men new access to God. By taking upon Himself the covenant curse brought upon mankind by the sin of Adam, Christ broke down the barrier between God and man.

Put to death in the flesh,

In His physical, earthly condition in which He resembles all other men.

he was brought to life in the Spirit.

At the resurrection, Christ became *pneuma* (spirit). Raised by the Father’s glory, Christ was endowed with a power making Him a living Spirit.

Gospel - John 14:15-21

Our reading for today is a continuation of our gospel reading for last week. We are at the Last Supper, just after Judas has left and Jesus has told the remaining eleven that He must soon depart too.

Jesus said to his disciples: ¹⁵ “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always,

Here, and in verse 26, the Spirit is said to be sent by the Father in the Name of Christ. In John 15:26 Christ sends Him from the Father – Christian tradition has spoken of the procession of the Holy Spirit both as from the Father through the Son and as from the Father and the Son. The Spirit is “another” Advocate because the Son Himself has been the first. Some translations use the term Paraclete instead of Advocate; Paraclete is a legal term that had been taken into Jewish use, signifying an advocate/ helper/ mediator.

¹⁷ the Spirit of truth,

This term partially defines the role of Advocate, to guide the Church in truth. Truth is His characteristic as it has been that of the first Advocate.

which the world cannot accept,

Neither could the world accept the Son, refusing to see in Him the revelation of the Father.

because it neither sees nor knows it.

The presence of the Spirit will be visible, as was the true nature of Christ, only to the eye of faith.

But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you.

The Holy Spirit will be both in the Church and in the early Christian.

¹⁸ I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.

The coming of the Spirit will also entail the coming of the Son (and the Father as we find in verse 20) because of the shared life of the persons in the Trinity.

¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me,

Again, through the vision of faith; for Jesus will depart shortly from the sight of the world.

because I live and you will live.

In His glorified state, the life of Christ is the principle by which Christians also live the life of God; with the indwelling of the Holy Trinity.

²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you.

Jesus will not be absent from them because He and His disciples share life – the life of the Father. Living this life, the Christian will experience (know), in varying degrees depending on his sensitivity to the divine presence, the affirmation of his faith – the Father, Son, and the Church share the one life.

²¹ Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me.

It is not sufficient merely to acknowledge the law of Christ, one must also observe it in their life. Obedience is the proof of love, which in turn makes possible the communion between God and man. The condition of the shared life which is promised is love and obedience.

And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him.”

He will also not be absent because they share a common love – again in the Father.

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>