

6th Sunday of Easter – Cycle C

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 15:1-2, 22-29

Last week we heard of the end of Saint Paul's first missionary journey. Today we hear of the Council of Jerusalem.

Just as the Jewish faith had a ruling council (Greek: *Synedrion*; transliterated into English as Sanhedrin), the early Christian church was not disorganized with the apostles and their followers each going their own separate ways. When a question arose, they would gather to work out a common answer which was applicable to all. The council of Jerusalem is the first known of these councils and was called to answer the questions raised by the Judaizers around A.D. 50, some 17-20 years after Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. Since that time there have been many local councils and 21 universal (ecumenical) councils. To be considered an ecumenical council, the works must be approved by the pope.

The council of Jerusalem falls in the middle of the book of Acts and describes the turning point for the Church when the council officially recognizes the evangelization of the Gentiles. This evangelization had been initiated by Saints Peter, Barnabas and Paul. Thus, the Christian church broke away from the Mosaic rules while maintaining its roots in the rich theology and traditions of the chosen people.

15:1 Some who had come down from Judea

This points to the Jerusalem church as their origin.

were instructing the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised

The main issue at this council is “do you have to become a Jew before you can become a Christian?”

according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved.”

Circumcision was prescribed by the Torah which, according to Hebrew tradition, was written down by Moses. Genesis 17:9 traces the practice of circumcision to Abraham. Circumcision placed a physical mark on the body indicating that the bearer was one of God's chosen people.

² Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them,

For once, Saint Luke reports a conflict that Saint Paul does not (see Galatians 2:1).

it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and presbyters about this question.

The officials of the Jerusalem church. Galatians 2:9 tells us that Saints Peter, James and John were there.

Our reading today skips over verses 3-21 which give some insight into how the Council proceeded. Let's review them to gain some background:

³ They were sent on their journey by the church, and passed through Phoenicia and Samaria telling of the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. ⁴ When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, as well as by the apostles and the presbyters, and they reported what God had done with them. ⁵ But some from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Mosaic law." ⁶ The apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter. ⁷ After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them, "My brothers, you are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the holy Spirit just as he did us. ⁹ He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts. ¹⁰ Why, then, are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they." ¹² The whole assembly fell silent,

Notice that after Saint Peter (our first pope) speaks, the issue is settled; there is no more debate.

and they listened while Paul and Barnabas described the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them. ¹³ After they had fallen silent, James responded, "My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Symeon has described how God first concerned himself with acquiring from among the Gentiles a people for his name. ¹⁵ The words of the prophets agree with this, as is written: ¹⁶ 'After this I shall return and rebuild the fallen hut of David; from its ruins I shall rebuild it and raise it up again, ¹⁷ so that the rest of humanity may seek out the Lord, even all the Gentiles on whom my name is invoked. Thus says the Lord who accomplishes these things, ¹⁸ known from of old.' ¹⁹ It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, ²⁰ but tell them by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. ²¹ For Moses, for generations now, has had those who proclaim him in every town, as he has been read in the synagogues every sabbath."

Saint Paul is not amending Saint Peter's decision but is offering a manner of implementation which will not offend the sensibilities of the Jewish onlookers while at the same time relieving the converts, both Jewish and Gentile, of the prescriptions of the Mosaic law.

And now, back to the reading.

22 Then the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church, decided to choose representatives and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The ones chosen were Judas, who was called Barsabbas,

He is otherwise unknown.

and Silas,

Saint Paul's future companion

leaders among the brothers. 23 This is the letter delivered by them: "The apostles and the presbyters, your brothers, to the brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia of Gentile origin:

Although the problem appeared in Antioch, the letter is addressed to its expanding mission territories.

greetings. 24 Since we have heard that some of our number (who went out) without any mandate from us

The implication is that the conduct was unauthorized. This would indicate that there was a central authority within the Church, even at this early date.

have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind, 25 we have

Verse 22 says "apostles and elders" this is the central authority within the Church.

with one accord

The decision was unanimous. Verse 22 declares "in agreement with the whole church." The ruling body has the ability (and responsibility) to bind the Church in matters of doctrine (Matthew 16:19, 18:18).

decided to choose representatives and to send them to you along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26 who have dedicated their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27 So we are sending Judas and Silas who will also convey this same message

by word of mouth: ²⁸ 'It is the decision of the holy Spirit

The true guide of the Church as it spreads from Jerusalem. It directs the work of the authorities as they make the decision. Church authority does not act on its own power or agenda; it is legitimate only in carrying out the saving will of God. The text which follows contains two parts; one disciplinary, and the other moral.

and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities, ²⁹ namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals,

This is the disciplinary part which lays down rules of prudence which can change. It asks Christians of Gentile background to abstain, out of charity toward Jewish Christians, from what has been sacrificed to idols, from blood, and from meat of animals killed by strangulation (thus still having the blood in them). To perform these things would be a sure way of breaking up a mixed Christian community of Jewish and Gentile Christians. The effect of the decree means that the disciplinary rules contained in it, although they derive from the Mosaic law, no longer oblige by virtue of that law but rather by virtue of the authority of the Church, which has decided to apply them for the time being. What matters is not what Moses says but what Jesus the Christ says through the Church.

and from unlawful marriage.

This is the moral part, it declares that the pagan (Gentile) converts are free of the obligation of circumcision and of the Mosaic law but are subject to the gospel's immutable moral teaching on matters to do with chastity.

If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell.'"

2nd Reading - Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23

Last week we heard the beginning of John's description of the Heavenly Jerusalem, we now continue with that description. We must remember that it was Jesus' mission to go to the earthly Jerusalem to offer His sacrifice; so that we could find the path which we must follow to reach the Heavenly Jerusalem and dwell with Him forever.

¹⁰ He [the angel] took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

The seer is granted a vision wherein he is taken to a high mountain to admire the spouse descending from the presence of God (see Ezekiel 40:2-3). He is an inspired apostle, receiving revelation.

11 It gleamed with the splendor of God.

Like the transfiguration, and when Moses came down from the mountain. God's presence, filling the Church, transfigures her. During Judah's apostasy, the prophet Ezekiel saw the Glory-Cloud (*Shekinah*) depart from the Temple and travel east, to the Mount of Olives (Ezekiel 10:18-19; 11:22-23); later, in his vision of the New Jerusalem, he sees the *Shekinah* returning to dwell in the new Temple, the Church (Ezekiel 43:1-5). This was fulfilled when Christ, the incarnate Glory of God, ascended to His Father in the Cloud from the Mount of Olives (Luke 24:50-51), thereupon sending His Spirit to fill the Church at Pentecost.

Its radiance was like that of a precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal.

The glory of the Church is being compared with its source, the splendor (glory) of God. Recall also the reading from Isaiah 54:11-12 we heard last Easter vigil ("*Because of his affliction he shall see the light in fullness of days. Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear. Therefore I will give him his portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty, because he surrendered himself to death and was counted among the wicked; and he shall take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offenses.*")

12 It had a massive, high wall, with twelve gates where twelve angels

Because the city comes from heaven, these must be the celestial guards.

were stationed and on which names were inscribed, (the names) of the twelve tribes of the Israelites.

John alludes to the perfect continuity between God's people in the Old Covenant (Ezekiel 48:30-35; Exodus 28:17-21) and the Church in the New Covenant (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:29).

13 There were three gates

Three, in Hebrew numerology, is the number of completion.

facing east, three north, three south, and three west.

Four directions, in Hebrew numerology, this indicates the whole world. Three gates times four directions equals twelve, the number of earthly fullness and governmental perfection in Hebrew numerology.

14 The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were inscribed the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

The preaching of the apostles is to the formation of the Church as the foundation is to an edifice (see 1 Timothy 3:15b).

22 I saw no temple in the city,

The temple was the focal point of the historical Jerusalem, for it was there that God dwelt among His people. But God's presence in the heavenly Jerusalem is not bounded by temple walls (John 4:21,24). The glory of God and the Lamb completely permeates the city (John 2:19-22; 2 Corinthians 6:16). In Revelation 21:15 (omitted in our reading today) we find that Saint John measured this Heavenly Jerusalem and found that it was a perfect cube; its length, breadth, and height were equal. This means that the Heavenly Jerusalem is shaped just like the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 6:20), in fact it is the Holy of Holies. There is no longer a need for the Holy Place or the various courtyards, everyone can approach God directly.

for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb.

He is consistently and intimately associated with God.

23 The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb.

See Isaiah 24:23; 60:1-3, 19-20; John 8:12; 1 John 1:5.

Gospel - John 14:23:29

Having heard last week of Jesus giving us a new commandment, to love one another, we rejoin Jesus and the apostles at the Last Supper. Jesus is instructing His apostles of the things to come. Before entering into the reading for today, it might be useful and informative to backtrack a few verses to John 14:15 and read:

15 "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

The ten commandments, the new one just given (Love one another), and later "Do this in remembrance of me."

16 And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, 17 the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you desolate;

As orphans, without a family.

I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. ²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.” ²² Judas (not Iscariot)

Judas the son of James, included in Luke’s list of the twelve (Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13) and traditionally identified with the Thaddeus of Mark 3:18 and Matthew 10:3.

said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?”

The answer to this question is the Eucharist. It is present throughout the world but is not believed.

²³ Jesus answered and said to him, “Whoever loves me will keep my word,

He who has my commandments and keeps them.

and my Father will love him,

Covenant language and imagery.

and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him.

There is no longer any separation between God and the believers; they don’t need to look to the parousia to experience the presence of God.

²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words;

It is the lack of love and obedience that precludes the world from having any part in this manifestation of Father and Son. “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3).” “All who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (John 1:12).”

yet the word you hear is not mine but that of the Father who sent me. ²⁵ “I have told you this while I am with you. ²⁶ The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name -

As the Son was sent in the name of the Father to do His works and will (John 5:43), so the Spirit stands in relation to the Son. Recall that in Semitic usage, name is equivalent to the person. Faith is not simply the acceptance of a proposition, but a commitment to a person.

he will teach you everything and remind you of all that (I) told you.

After Christ's ascension, it will be the function of the Holy Spirit to complete the revelation of Christ by enlightening the Church concerning the true and full meaning of what Jesus had done and said. This function was not completed when the New Testament was written but continues today as the Church continues to guide and teach.

²⁷ Peace

Peace, in Hebrew is *shalom*. *Shalom* was and is the common Jewish formula of greeting and farewell. The word has a much deeper significance however, as an expression of the harmony and communion with God that is the seal of the covenant (see Numbers 6:24-26). *Shalom* came to have an eschatological and messianic meaning (see Isaiah 9:6), virtually the same as salvation. It is this spiritual tranquility that Christ gives, which has no resemblance to what the world gives.

I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. ²⁸ You heard me tell you, 'I am going away and I will come back to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father; for the Father is greater than I.

During the Arian controversy, this verse was used to support a subordinationist Christology. Though Christ is one with the Father (John 10:30), as the Son he has been sent by the Father to do His will, and in this relationship the Father is the greater. Christ's return to the Father with His mission accomplished is the condition of all that He has promised to His disciples.

²⁹ And now I have told you this before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe.