

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER – A

In the gospel reading we listen to Jesus preparing his disciples for his departure, he tells them not to be troubled because he is going to prepare a place for them, 'so that where I am you may be too.' We then have a further revelation of Jesus' identity, 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.' In the first reading we hear how the Church continues to grow and how the Twelve dealt with the problem of food distribution. In the second reading we have the wonderful teaching that by sharing in Christ's priesthood we give praise to God.

The **First Reading** is from Acts of the Apostles. This New Testament book is part two of a history of the rise of Christianity, the first part being the gospel according to Luke. They became separated when, about 150 A.D., Christians wanted the four gospel accounts bound together in one volume. The author, Luke, is a Syrian from Antioch, a doctor of non-Jewish origin, who was a close friend of Paul accompanying him on his second and third missionary journeys. Luke collected a great deal of evidence from a variety of sources which he edited. The book deals with the primitive Jerusalem community under Peter's leadership, the spread of Christianity to Samaria, to the gentile peoples and the early days of Christianity in Antioch. From chapter 13 Luke deals with Paul's three missionary journeys and ends with Paul a prisoner in Rome.

The reading, 6.1-7, tells of a problem in the early Church. With an increase of converts difficulties arose between the Hebrew and Hellenist converts, the Hebrews were native Palestinian Jews their language was Aramaic and in their synagogues the Bible was read in Hebrew. The Hellenists were Jews from outside Palestine and they had in Jerusalem their own synagogues where the Bible was read in Greek. These Hellenists thought they were not getting an equal share of the daily assistance given out to widows. The Twelve called a meeting of all concerned and decided seven men should be selected to deal with this problem, seven representing the number of gentile 'nations' inhabiting Canaan. All seven chosen had Greek names. The Hellenistic Christians now had their organisation independent of the Hebrew group. When the community met for worship it was the responsibility of the apostles to lead the prayers and explain the gospel teaching. The duties of the Seven overlap those of the Twelve, for they preach and baptise in their own language. No doubt Luke, a gentle man of peace, smoothed over some of the bigger disagreements between the two groups which led to a parallel leadership. Despite these disagreements the community continued to grow. The distinction between Hebrew and Hellenistic (Greek speaking) Christians made its way into the early Church and it was from the Hellenists that missionary activity was to come.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 32.1-2,4-5,18-19, is a song in praise of God. We must ring out our joy to the Lord for his word is to be trusted. The Lord looks on those who revere him he will save us in time of need a psalm which is suitable for the early Church in their needs and so for us today.

The **Second Reading** is from the first letter of St Peter. This is one of the 'universal' letters or Catholic Epistles which are addressed to the whole Church rather than to one particular community like the Pauline letters. The letter is attributed to Peter because his name is mentioned in the opening verse of the letter but his authorship is still unproven. He writes from Rome (Babylon 5.13) to the churches of Asia Minor (Turkey). The purpose of the letter is to help its readers' faith in time of trial Christians must suffer patiently like Christ in time of trial. The letter is also a valuable summary of apostolic theology.

The reading, 2.4-9, contains important teaching about the new priesthood. It begins by teaching that Christ is 'the living stone' and that they should 'set yourselves close to him so that you too may be living stones,' stones are used for building and the reading continues, 'making a spiritual house as a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices.' Perhaps there is an allusion to Exodus 19.6 'For me you shall be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.' The reading makes a contrast with unbelievers for the stone mentioned at the beginning of the reading that is Christ, is for unbelievers 'a stumbling stone, a rock to trip people up. They stumble over it because they do not believe in the Word.' In contrast for those who believe, 'But you...you are....' and to the members of the Church are addressed the titles given to the chosen people to underline the Church's relationship with God. This 'nation of peoples' by belonging to Christ gains a unity in Christ which defies all classification and are called 'to sing the praises of God.'