

Commentary on Sunday Scripture Readings

Second Sunday of Easter

First reading:

The Early Community
(Acts 5.12-16)

Before he tells us of the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth, Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, tells us about the ideal community in Jerusalem. He stresses their unity, their prayer together, their common ownership of all their possessions, their generosity to those in need, and their steadfastness under the persecution by the authorities who refused to accept their message. It is the model for any Christian community, which all our Christian communities need to strive to imitate, a real centre of the love and confidence of Christ. In today's reading, he tells how in the early community the same signs and wonders of healing that Jesus himself had worked are worked also by the apostles, and especially by Peter. It is a theme throughout the Acts that the followers of Jesus, filled with his Spirit, continue his work and live with his life, expressing the power of the Risen Christ, who remains with them always. Luke also wants to underline that Jerusalem is being given a second chance: they had rejected Jesus, but now are given a second chance at the hands of his apostles, the witnesses to his Resurrection. Hence the comment that the numbers of believers increased steadily. The martyrdom of Stephen will mark the end and the failure of this second chance.

Question: What work of Christian healing can I do now?

Second reading:

A Vision of the Lord Christ
(Revelation 1.9-13, 17-19)

The first reading during Eastertide is about the beginnings of the Church. During this season of Eastertide in Year C the second reading is about the end and completion of the Church, taken from the Book of Revelation. This, the last Book of the Bible, was written to assure Christians, struggling under persecution from the Roman Empire, that the Risen Christ would eventually bring his Church to triumph and release them from all sorrow and sadness. It uses extravagant cosmic imagery to emphasize God's total control of the universe, heaven and earth, and all that is in them. It is very imaginative, drawing heavily on the imagery of the Old Testament and on the symbolism of numbers.

The narrator is the Apostle John, exiled to the Greek island of Patmos, and it begins with a vision of the Risen Christ in all his glory. 'Son of man' was Jesus' favourite way of referring to himself. Here the 'Son of man' is also reminiscent of the Son of man in the prophet Daniel's vision, to whom God gives all power over the universe. The seven lampstands (seven is the perfect number) represent the seven local Churches of Asia to whom the Book was primarily addressed.

Question: This vision of Christ was written down to inspire and energize a real Christian community; does it inspire and energize mine?

Gospel: *Jesus in the Upper Room* *(John 20.19-31)*

Two aspects of this meeting are especially striking. This is the last scene of the gospel of John, for Chapter 21 is an appendix. At the end, before the concluding reflection, Thomas gives the only direct acclamation in the New Testament of Jesus as God. Nowhere else is Jesus directly hailed as 'God', although there are ways in which he is equivalently so presented. So, in a way, this acclamation of the Risen Christ is the climax of the New Testament.

Second, it is striking that Jesus' final blessing is of peace and forgiveness. The mission of all Christians is to bring these to a troubled world. Throughout the Bible God is a God of forgiveness. The Old Testament consists of a series of covenants of forgiveness, each in turn broken by God's Chosen People. The covenant with Noah after the Flood, the covenant with Abraham, with Moses after the worship of the Golden Calf, finally the new covenant promised by Jeremiah when unfaithful Israel is being exiled to Babylon.

Christianity is not for the perfect but for the sinner, surrounded by sinners. Forgiven sinners must bring forgiveness to all those around them.

Question:

Should there be any limit to Christian forgiveness? What constitutes the 'peace of the Risen Christ'?
