

Fifth Sunday of Easter

First reading:

*The Appointment of Deacons
(Acts 6.1-7)*

There are two really striking features about this story. The first is that the first officials appointed in the Church are called 'servers' or 'servants', which is what 'deacons' means.

St Paul will stress, writing to the Corinthian community, that any job in the Church is a service to the community. It is not a dignity to be proud of, except in so far as it is a sharing in the service given by Christ himself, the Servant of the Lord. The most important part of it is to attend to the needs of the community, not to preen oneself on getting a grand position.

The second feature is that even so early in the life of the ideal early community a squabble occurs. One group feels that it is being neglected. The split may even be worse than Luke allows us to see, for all the new officials appointed belong to one of the two parties, the Hellenists. This is not going to ensure an even distribution of food between the two parties! Is a completely different organization being set up, so that the deacons are, in fact, a leadership parallel to that of the apostles? Even in a good community reconciliation of differences needs to occur constantly.

Question:

Is there any split in your community that needs to be reconciled?

Second reading:

*A Royal Priesthood
(1 Peter 2.4-9)*

The background of this reading is the covenant between God and his people of Israel on Mount Sinai. There the mountain was so sacred that the people were not allowed to approach it.

Now the author tells us that the new people of God, chosen by God, is so sacred that we can huddle close to the rock that is Christ. In the old dispensation, Moses alone was holy enough to approach the mountain and offer sacrifice; now it is the whole people. The whole people now constitute a royal priesthood and a consecrated people that can offer sacrifice.

One of the principal emphases of Vatican II was that the Eucharistic sacrifice is offered by the whole people, not by the priest alone. Yes, the priest does have a special function, that of presiding at the Eucharist, and without this presidency the Eucharist cannot take place. Nevertheless, it is the sacrifice of the people as a whole, which the laity offer just as much as the priest. The reading also uses another Gospel image: the people of God is a house built of living stones, a living holy Temple, joined to the foundation stone who is Christ.

Question:

What difference does it make that the Mass is the offering of the people as a whole?

Gospel: *Jesus warns of his Departure*

(John 14.1-12)

As the festival of the Ascension approaches, Jesus begins to prepare his followers for his own departure from the world.

There are two aspects of this. First, Jesus speaks of the final purpose, union with the Father, and his preparation of a place for us there. 'There is plenty of room', he says, suggesting not that there are plenty of separate cubicles for different sets of people (bishops, babies, monks and maniacs), but that there is no lack of space. No problem of 'only one wins the prize' in this case.

The second aspect is preparation for the future Church on earth, and the almost shocking promise that in the absence of Jesus - but in the strength of his Spirit - his people will do 'even greater works'. Paul teaches that believers 'make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ', for in every age the Church fills up the measure of Christ's sufferings; it is a Church that shares its Master's trials.

In the same way, in every age, the Church must carry on the works of Christ. In John, the 'works' of Jesus are the marvellous deeds, beyond human powers, which show who Jesus is. We too are called on to perform marvellous deeds, beyond human powers, works of grace and generosity.

Question:

In heaven what will our relationship with other people be?
