

Open Doors of Faith & Love

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Cycle C – 19 May 2019

Readings: Acts 14:21-27; Rev 21:1-5a; Jn 13:31-33a, 34-35.

“They declared ... how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts)

Three Scriptural Signposts

1. During the Easter season, the Church places before us passages from the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ since this is a ‘seedling church’ that is taking root and bearing fruit. The first reading describes the homeward leg of the ‘first missionary journey’ where Paul and Barnabas revisit the communities they had founded. This was the shortest of his journeys lasting a little more than two years—approx. from 46 AD to 48 AD—marked with many difficulties and persecutions and described in Acts, chapters 13 & 14. Paul would normally preach to both, Jews and Gentiles. Of these two groups, he faced colder response and endured more persecutions from the Jews as compared to his experiences with the so-called ‘Gentiles’ who more readily accepted the Good News and Christ as their Saviour. Paul realistically cautions the new converts that they, too, “through many persecutions ... must enter the kingdom of God.” Noteworthy in this passage is Paul’s pastoral practice. Aware that the faith of the new converts would require careful nurturing, Paul and Barnabas: “strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith.”
2. While Paul and Barnabas are eager to preach and strengthen the faith of the newly baptized Christians, they are also aware of the need for certain church-structures to be set up with proper personnel to minister to the flock. Therefore, they “appoint elders” after “prayer and fasting and entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.” They are keen to ensure that Spirit-gifted charisms are channelized for meeting certain pastoral needs. It is important to note that the newborn church is being built both, by God’s grace, as well as by human effort. In this first missionary journey, on the one hand, Paul and Barnabas proclaim the word at Pisidia, Pamphylia, Perga, Attalia and Antioch, which shows their tireless ‘activity’; while, on the other hand, they also give an account “of all that God had done with them” (passive). God was the prime actor, so to say; while they were only God’s instruments. The passage ends beautifully by stressing that it was God—and not the apostles—who “opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” Mission becomes effective and fruitful only when the missionary and disciple surrenders to God.
3. The gospel passage is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse at the Last Supper. It begins with, “When Judas had gone out, Jesus said to his disciples ...” This departure of Judas from the table is the prelude to Jesus’ passion which, in the gospel according to John, is also part of his glorification. Jesus’ passion → crucifixion → death → resurrection are all steps in the whole process of glorification; for, Jesus’ total and perfect surrender to his Father is the wellspring of his glorification. Like a father leaving his children for a prolonged, dangerous mission, Jesus addressed his disciples with words of tenderness. He says, “Little children ...” and predicts that they will, indeed, miss his physical presence. However, Jesus gives them a new commandment: “Love one another ... Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” This love is going to be the hallmark, the distinguishing character for

all disciples—present and future: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.” While ‘love’ is an old teaching found even in the First Testament, there are two ‘new’ components in Jesus’ love-commandment: (a) Jews understood only fellow-Jews as their ‘neighbour’; hence, their love was exclusive and their circle was closed to non-Jews. By contrast, Jesus’ new love-commandment embraced everyone. (b) Jesus’ love was total and unconditional—even to the extent of dying on account of love for the other.

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme of Faith and Love:

While the first reading speaks of the new faith of the newly-baptized Christians and the gospel has the ‘new commandment’ given by Jesus, the second reading from Revelation describes John the Seer’s vision of “a new heaven and new earth”. These ‘new things’ have been established in principle through Jesus’ resurrection, which gives us a foretaste of heaven when “God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more sadness.” The reading ends with, “See, I am making all things new.” Here, too, one can stress the need for God’s action, as well as the cooperation of humankind to bring about newness—in faith, hope [heaven], love.

Three Lights from Catholic Tradition:

1. Tertullian’s Letter ‘Apologeticus’ in 197 AD to the Roman authorities to plead for justice for the church in the face of cruel opposition: “See how they [Christians] love each other, indeed, but see also how they live their lives in courageous holiness. The early Christians practiced disciplined living for the sake of Christ in a world that neither understood them nor welcomed their strange ways.”
2. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI published two documents on love. *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) described the dynamics and demands of love. Later, in *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), he explained how we encounter the God of Love in the ‘Sacrament of Love’, the Eucharist. He wrote: “Love can be ‘commanded’ because it has first been given.” Indeed, Jesus’ self-oblation is the model and motive of all our acts of self-giving.
3. Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) writes: “A Church which ‘goes forth’ is a Church whose doors are open” [n.46] ... and, “The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door” [n.47].

Reflection: Jesus says, “By this [selfless love] will everyone know that you are my disciples.” In India, where Christians are barely 2% of the total population, can the believers of other religions say of us as they did of Christians in the early church: “Look how these Christians love one another!?” Sadly, instead of uniting us, religion has often divided us into sects and denominations.

In Lighter Vein: Sam once asked his little neighbour, Samantha, “Are you a Catholic?” Samantha replied solemnly, “No, we belong to another abomination!” Christian denominations have become abominations in the sight of God. If God is to “*open the doors of faith*” for people of other religions to enter the church, we Christians must open the doors of love.
