

6<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER, C CYCLE, MAY 26, 2019

**1st Reading:** Acts 15:1-29 [Our belief is that we are saved by the grace of Christ, and so are they]

**Responsorial Psalm:** Psalm 67 "O God, let all the nations praise you."

**2nd Reading:** Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23 [I saw the holy city ... the glory of God gave it light and its lamp was the Lamb]

**Gospel:** John 14:23-29 [The Advocate, the Holy Spirit will teach you everything... do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid]

♪ I want to walk as a child of the light, I want to follow Jesus.

God set the stars to give light to the world; the star of my life is Jesus.

*In him there is no darkness at all, the night and the day are both alike.*

*The Lamb is the light of the city of God, shine in my heart, Lord Jesus. ♪*

We are children of the light by the grace of Christ. That's what we are celebrating during the Easter Season. You will hear it in the Preface today, at the beginning of the Eucharistic Prayer, "*Through Christ the children of light rise to eternal life.*" That's what the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading and the whole book of Revelation proclaims through sometimes strange images that are more poetry than history.

[The book of revelation is often quoted by people who want to predict the end of the world, and some of its bizarre and flamboyant symbols have been applied literally to events and people down through the centuries. They would probably make a good video game or horror movie, but are not meant to be taken literally. The book is really a patchwork of references and allusions to the Old Testament. Some scholars have said it really belongs between the Old Testament and the Gospels and comes from the community that followed John the Baptist.]

At the end of the reading today we hear, "*The city had no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God gave it light, & its lamp was the Lamb.*" The son makes it personal:

*♪The Lamb is the light of the city of God, shine in my heart, Lord Jesus. ♪*

But it is not easy to really be who we are, to be children of the light. I need to **walk** as a child of the light, that is, live my everyday life as a child of the light - in good times and in bad, in times of crisis and oppression as well as in times of prosperity and security.

The passage we hear today, from chapter 21 of the book of Revelation, overflows with images of abundance and hope. The next chapter, the last in the book, talks about a river running through the city - a river of life-giving water with trees on either side that bear fruit every month & have leaves that serve as medicine. The Good News hidden in the midst of poetic symbols is that God is enough; that the grace of God revealed in Christ is abundant and life giving



even in the midst of conflict, war, crisis and suffering. That was the message for the Christians of the first century, who could be arrested and executed for the crime of being a Christian.

The first reading tells us about a crisis in the community in Antioch: There were strong disagreements about whether the people who joined the Way of Christ were required to keep the whole Law of Moses. The Lectionary translation does not do the conflict justice. It was a fight, and even Peter and Paul were confronting each other, and the issue at hand. This chapter from the Acts of the Apostles gives me hope that it is possible to disagree about issues today without condemning the other side or controlling the outcome.

Some Jews who had become Christians came to Antioch and were teaching that: *"Unless you are circumcised according to Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved."* This statement overflows with control and judgment. These pharisees who had become Christians wanted to control access to salvation & they were sitting in judgment on those who did not come to Christ the way they did.

I like to call that the great "UNLESS." That attitude has popped up throughout the centuries in many ways. For example, when I was a child in the 1950's, I used to hear people say *"Unless you are a Catholic, you cannot be saved."* Others in our history have implied, *"Unless you pray the way I do, your prayer will not be effective;"* Some seem to say, *"Unless you are excited about the current devotion, your prayer will not be answered."*

It's a subtle way of hinting that you can save yourself by what you do and the way you pray. It is full of a desire to be in control. In a verse from that same chapter in Acts - words that are not included in today's lectionary reading - Peter speaks in the name of the whole church, *"Our belief is that we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, and so are they."* [Acts 15:11] That statement is as true today as it was then, whoever "they" happen to be right now. It is a statement of abundance which locates the power in God, Christ & the Holy Spirit, rather than in rituals that can change or religious leaders who want to control the grace of God.

I highly recommend that you read the whole chapter 15 in the Acts of the Apostles, or at least verses 1-29. It is the story of the council in Jerusalem that opened the door for most of us here to be members of the church without having to keep all the regulations of Judaism.

And the great "Unless" contains a condemnation which judges others who are not like us. For example, *"Unless you condemn those whose sexual orientation is different from yours, you are not following Christ;"* Or, an attitude that is all too common today, *"Unless you condemn anyone who disagrees with you, you are not in the right."*

This attitude of condemnation is reflected in our culture today & in our history as a nation. Racism and nativism are symptoms of the great "UNLESS" in our world. For example, I have heard people say things like, *"Unless you speak English, you are not a real American."* While seldom said directly, attitudes and structures in the world and the church imply that *Unless you are male, you cannot have real power.* And all too many tragic events in our country point to the attitude: *"Unless you are white, you don't really matter."*

The tendency to want control & to judge others is one that we all have at times. I know I am tempted to give in to it. It is vividly described in the book & movie, *The Shack*.

In one scene, Mack, the main character, meets a woman sitting on a large chair. Her name is Wisdom. Her conversation uncovers the truth that Mack had been judging many people in his life, and, because his young daughter had been kidnapped and killed, had even been sitting in judgment on God. Lady Wisdom invites him to sit in the judge's chair, & to choose which of his children will be saved, & which will be condemned.

He is deeply shocked and refuses. She persists & he finally offers himself in exchange for his children. At that point, he resembles Christ who is the only one who judges with wisdom & mercy. Finally, he realizes he is not wise enough or merciful enough to sit in the judgment seat.

Often, without even being aware, we sit in judgment on others, & on ourselves. We want to tell them what they need to do, for their own good. Or we swallow shame because we are sitting in judgment on ourselves. I guess we like to sit in Jesus' chair. When I find myself doing that, I picture Jesus coming to me & gently whispering in my ear, "*Peter, you are sitting in my chair.*" When I let him sit in his chair, when I let him replace me as my judge and the judge of everybody else, then I am opening my heart & my life to the grace of God & the light of the Holy Spirit that Peter speaks of at the council in Jerusalem.

Many people confess in the sacrament of Reconciliation that they are judgmental. I often give a simple penance- one which I pray myself often: "Jesus be my judge, Jesus be their judge."

The Gospel today presents a promise of presence, and a vision of abundance. Jesus will leave their presence as they had known him, but the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter [the Greek word "Paraclete" can also be translated "defense attorney"] will make him present in a new way. Jesus of Nazareth had to ascend to the Father, so that Christ the **Lord** could be with the Church.

That's what we celebrate this week on Ascension Thursday. We need to hear Jesus tell us what he told his first followers: "*Do not let your hearts be troubled and afraid,*" even in the midst of a world that seems to be falling apart, and church leaders who are, like all of us, both holy and sinful.

The remedy for our fear of not being in control and of our tendency to judge is to trust in the unbelievably abundant grace of Christ to save us rather than our own actions or choice of devotions.

The remedy for our tendency to harshly judge others & ourselves is to let Jesus sit in his chair and be our judge and the judge of every person, judging with mercy and truth. Once we let Christ be our true judge and trust more fully in the vision of abundance given to us by the Holy Spirit, we will be more able to walk as children of the light.

At this Eucharist we are invited to live the message of this hymn:

♪ Come to the feast of heaven and earth! Come to the table of plenty!  
God will provide for all that we need, here at the table of plenty.  
O come and sit at my table where saints and sinners are friends.  
I wait to welcome the lost and lonely to share the cup of my love. ♪

