



5th Sunday of Easter



Date: Sunday, May 14, 2017 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** A

First Reading: Acts 6:1–7

Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 33:1–2, 4–5, 18–19 | **Response:** Psalm 33:22

Second Reading: 1 Peter 2:4–9

Gospel Acclamation: John 14:6

Gospel Reading: John 14:1–12

Preached at: the Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Braamfontein in the Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa.

In today's first reading we hear how, as a result of the evangelization of the apostles, the number of disciples grew. But as the number of disciples grew, we are told, so did the complaints. In ways that we can identify with today, the complaints ran along the lines of linguistic tensions within the community. Let's remember that at this time there were essentially two groups of believers in Jesus. The newer minority group, the Hellenists, were Diaspora Jews who spoke Greek, and used the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) as their Bible. They had previously lived outside of Palestine but had at some point recently migrated back into Palestine and were now members of the Jerusalem Christian community.

The second, and the majority group, were the Hebrews, who were Jews native to Palestine who spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew, and whose Bible was primarily the Hebrew Old Testament.

The minority Hellenists complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food and financial assistance.

We might remember that Luke previously showed that within the community of believers those who had extra property sold some of it and presented the proceeds to the apostles, who distributed the money or goods to those in need. The Old Testament frequently urges care for those most vulnerable, especially widows and orphans – who represented what was known as the *anawim*, the poor, outcast and neglected, who were often persecuted. The prophets emphasize that

justice and mercy to the poor are grave obligations of God's people, more important than temple sacrifices. So the Hellenists were upset that they were being neglected. This was a concrete problem and was not ignored by the Twelve apostles. What they did was instructive, even for us in the Church today.

They called together the community of the disciples to ensure the participation of the whole church in resolving the problem, and then announced their proposed solution.

We see in the Church today, a return to this form of consultation, accompaniment and ultimately shared responsibility. With Pope Francis urging a more synodal way of deciding, and our Archbishop convoking last week an Archdiocesan Synod in 2019, we see the opportunity for members of the community to come together and discuss pressing issues.

What was remarkable about the way the 12 Apostles solved the dilemma, was that they appointed people from among the Hellenists, and they are tasked with ensuring that the distribution of the goods is done in a fair way. The resulting decision was the beginning of the ministry of Deacons in the Church. But it was more than that. It was an early example of the principle of subsidiarity in our Church, where we recognize that a centralized decision may not necessarily take into account all the nuances of a local reality, and so pastoral discernment is required. A previous way of doing something was replaced with another way, a way that took into account local needs.

Unlike the Apostles, we do not live in the Apostolic Age – that is the age in which people had direct memories of Jesus on earth. No – we live in the time of the church – and it is not always an easy one to live in. It is a time that is sometimes marked by tension and conflict and that periodically throws up new and difficult challenges that demand from both leaders and people creative and courageous decisions.

We must remember from the second reading that we are, because of our Baptism and faith in Christ, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, [and] a holy nation, [in fact] God's own people,” and that we must “declare the wonderful deeds of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

We must never forget that the time of the church is also, however, the time of the Spirit. It is she who inspires and strengthens us in our efforts to be a community of faith. The Church should not be a petrified tomb or a mountain that causes us to stumble, but is made up of living stones built upon a cornerstone that is a firm foundation for life.

So whenever there are tensions in the community – whether they be linguistic, or over an attitude towards previous legal interpretations that do not take into account local situations, we must remember that in the beginning of the Church, the 12 apostles, filled with zeal and the personal knowledge of Jesus Christ, opted for a solution that was innovative, creative, and pastorally sensitive. In effect, they listened to where the Spirit was leading them. This is the church, I believe, Pope Francis is inviting us, not only to inhabit, but also to work towards. This Church can't be built unless everyone in the Church – young, old, white, black, local-born, or foreigner, gay, straight, man and woman, and yes, even the transgendered and whomever occupies the position of outcast in every age, all are in fact first children of God and so no-one should feel that they do not belong in the Church – there is nothing 'outside' of the Church because as Vatican II taught us, yes there is no salvation outside of the Church, but Jesus came to bring salvation to all and so it is not that the Church is so small as to be exclusive, but that it was larger than we ever imagined and is inclusive – offering mercy and calling all to repentance and to a life following Jesus. That is why he is the Door that we spoke about last week, he is the Good Shepherd who searches for the lost, and that is why today we heard him say to us in the Gospel “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you”.

This you is not some abstract other. It is you. It is each of us. With all of our baggage, past sins and imperfect motivations. Jesus sees us on the road and is there to encourage us as we fall carrying our crosses. The early Christians spoke of the church as 'The Way', the 'Way of the Lord Jesus'. He points us always to the Father and promises to send the Spirit to help us.

The work of the early Church, I think, is mirrored nicely in what we do here at Holy Trinity. We baptize in the name of Jesus Christ, we welcome people to the Sacraments – in fact after Mass today we are welcoming the children who will be receiving their first sacrament of reconciliation. But we, like the early apos-

bles, distribute food to the poor and the hungry – in our case the homeless and the students. We cure the sick as we offer expert care and access to saving medicines every second Monday evening. This is not just a physical nourishment, but it is preceded by a spiritual nourishment as they gather – over 150 of them – to read and study the Bible every Monday evening.

And I would never be forgiven if I didn't mention that today we also celebrate Mothers. The Church herself is a mother of course. I laughed when I heard Pope Francis on the plane last week deplore the American MOAB airstrike, when he said how could a mother be the source of destruction, when motherhood is all about giving life. The church offers life, salvation, to all. And today we thank especially all mothers for their care and love for each of us. Please don't leave the Church today without picking up a little token from us to say thank you for all you do in your families and for helping them come to know the love of God.

So let us pray today for Mothers,

Let us pray today for each of us, that we might appreciate the room Jesus is preparing for us in his Father's House

Let us pray that we might make decisions that help the poor and the outcast.

Let us pray that in our differences, we might never lose sight of the one thing that unites us – that we are all children of God the Father, sons and daughters of our Church, our mother.

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