Fr Matthew Charlesworth, SJ
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5th Sunday of Easter

Date: Sunday, May 19, 2019 | **Season:** Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: Acts 14:21–27
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 145:8–13 | **Response:** Psalm 145:1
Second Reading: Revelation 21:1–5a
Gospel Acclamation: John 13:34
Gospel Reading: John 13:31–33a, 34–35
Preached at: the Carmelite Monastery of Sr Thérèse in Benoni **in the** Archdiocese of Johannesburg, South Africa**.**

In today's readings I think there are two verbs we should take special notice of. The first is 'encourage' from our first reading. The selection from the Acts of the Apostles describes the conclusion of St Paul's first missionary journey where he took the good news of Jesus. He began sharing it in the synagogues in each city where the Jews were, but then, as we heard in the last few weeks, he would preach also to the Gentiles. Some of the Jews distrusted Paul – they knew him as Saul and were wary of his conversion – which was why he was accompanied by Barnabas, the name means 'son of encouragement', who vouched for Paul and encouraged the disciples to believe. In some cases Paul was so convincing that – in the bit between last week's reading and today's – he asked God to heal a cripple and they thought he was the God Hermes. Today we find both Paul and Barnabas returning home, revisiting the various communities, "strengthening their souls" and "encouraging them to persevere in their faith" amidst hardships. After seeking the Spirit's guidance through prayer and fasting, they appointed elders and returned to Antioch, completing their journey. We might wonder why they returned to cities they had been chased from – I think it was because they wanted to strengthen the belief of the new converts. After all, there was suffering and hardship to be expected and some would fall away. How often do we see some people enter the church but then we do not see them again. How often do we even know the names of the people who come to Church with us each week? Paul and Barnabas were following-up and encouraging the new converts in their faith – you cannot do that if you do not care about them. They had preached the good news but that good news was not always easy to hear!

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Can you imagine how the new Christians would have responded to an instruction that they were going to have to experience suffering and trials in order to enter into the Kingdom? Let's ask ourselves this morning how do we respond to that same message today? What are the trials in our lives that we endure? Can we ask God, the God who is God-with-us, to help us in our suffering? Let us also ask ourselves this morning how, or in what ways, do we encourage each other? Where do we find our hope?

Our Psalm this morning is echoing the 34th chapter of the book of Exodus, where God declared himself to be a God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in kindness. This is the God whose name we bless and we remember all the great deeds he has done. For the Israelites, they would surely have remembered how they were once slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and that the Lord rescued them and freed them. When we praise the Lord – what are we thankful for? For a second just think of something concrete you are grateful to God for. And consider what it is we need to ask the Lord to free us from. Because that's the gift God offers us – of being free, and it is a freedom that enables us to build a community – to build a church – that nurtures faith, strengthens hope and helps us to love one another as Jesus first loved us. And that's the second verb I think we should pay attention to this morning, love.

In our 2nd reading from the book of Revelation John writes to the seven churches of Asia Minor who were suffering persecution because of their faith, and he encourages them by describing the final vision of the heavenly Jerusalem where cruelty, pain, and opposition will all be banished forever and the bond between God and his people is fully restored.

In this reading we are offered a poignant and tender image of our God who always encourages and loves us. St Ignatius, in his Spiritual Exercises, says that "The love which moves me and makes me choose something has to descend from above." This love therefore comes from God, Our God, who in this reading, is like a loving mother who bends down to kiss away a child's bruise and wipes away all the tears. In doing so we are told the whole of creation is being made new. When we say that God is love and God created the world in the beginning, we are affirming that we are products of, and made from, love – and love can constantly re-create for us – it can be the force that allows us to begin again and start afresh. What is it that we desire to see made new in our lives and in our world? Where or to whom can we bring the message of God's love?

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Over the last few weeks of the Easter season, many stories have been recounted about the early Church and how it learned of Jesus' resurrection. We can recall the stories of the empty tomb, the weeping women, the empowered apostles, and the converted Paul. But today's gospel – coming as it does after the half-way point of the 50 day Easter season gives meaning, I believe, to it all.

In this morning's Gospel Jesus is saying farewell to his friends at the Last Supper. Even though he knows that his trials and suffering lay ahead, he leaves his disciples with a word of encouragement, a new commandment we are told. "Love one another, as I have loved you."

The novelty or newness in the message of Jesus is not simply in the idea or the "commandment" of love; for injunctions to love can be found already in the Old Testament and in several of the other great world religions. What is 'new' is the dimension of love "as Jesus has loved us." Us – all of us, here and now in 2019… How can we love as Jesus loved us? Our love must have the same source as the love which inspired Jesus, namely, the relation to God. This is a relationship that Jesus suffered because of, but also one which glorified Him and raised Him from the dead. This reminds us that love always triumphs. To love as Jesus loved means we will be glorified and living a new kind of life when we love. Because love is transformative.

Let's think for a moment about our relationship with God. I believe that we can only truly love one another once we accept God's love for ourselves. That is what makes us capable of love, that sure conviction that God loved us – and the comforting realization that, in fact, God loved us first. And that He loved us into being.

Let us ask God this morning to remind us again of his love for each one of us. Let us pray that we might have a heart-felt experience of God's love so that we can love everyone. Not just those who love us, but those who are also difficult to love. Because isn't that the acid-test of being a follower of Jesus – that we can forgive and love and encourage?

St Ignatius also told us that love shows itself more in deeds than in words.

Let us pray this morning to love others more, and more, as Jesus loves us, so that all of us here can help play our own parts in making all things new. Amen.

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