



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

6th Sunday of Easter Year C

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us

Readings: Acts 15:1-2, 22-29, Ps 66, Ap 21:10-14, 22-23, John 14:23-29

Casual listeners to the Scriptural readings at Mass today will probably have quietly 'zoned out' during the first lesson from the Acts of the Apostles. It appears to centre on the requirements – or lack of them – for circumcision. As this practice, at least until recently and the exposure of the cruel practices of foreign cultures, does not affect 50 % of the British population and, for the other 50 % was a done deal one way or the other long before conscious memory, it seems a trifle arcane or passing irrelevant.

What makes the passage even more incomprehensible is the fact that, as you will observe, the lectionary composer has eliminated the whole central section which gives context and sense to the debate. The missing verses contain absolutely vital stuff. More of that in a moment.

First, I'm afraid, we do need to dwell on circumcision.

In the world of the early Church circumcision was not a hygiene issue nor an aesthetic issue. It was, in fact, the presenting issue of a massive

conundrum that had to be resolved by the earliest community of the Faith if she was to fulfil her destiny as the Universal Church of Christ.

The question was....

Did you have to be a fully practising Jew to become a Christian?

Did you have, as a token of that, to be circumcised?

Did you have to keep all the dietary laws?

Did you have to attend an increasingly hostile and unsympathetic synagogue or Temple?

Would the Church have to be a Jerusalem centred cult ?

Would the Levitical laws apply to the Priesthood of Christ ?

And so on and so on.

Believing, as Peter and Paul and all the Apostles did, in the fact that the whole vocation of Israel had been fulfilled in the Messiah and the New Covenant in His Blood and could now fulfil the promise to Abraham that, in him, shall all the nations of the earth be blessed and restored to God, the answer to all those questions had to be a resounding, 'NO'.

To embrace a geographical or racial restriction was a denial of Christ's command to go to all the earth.

To accept Levitical priesthood was to make a narrowly tribal settlement which excluded 90% of Jews from that calling and ALL gentiles.

To repeat the dietary laws was to limit fellowship and hospitality and, much worse, to divide the Church in two, 'foodies' and 'faddies' – two separate tables, a purpose built schism at the heart of the new community.

Much, therefore, hung on this momentous decision.

The critical decision was taken (in the missing verses) at the Council of Jerusalem in AD 50. How this decision was made is critical to (and determinative of) the pattern of how the Church has decided deep matters of the Faith ever since.

The Church is summoned. Her representatives come from the Faith communities throughout the world. Evidence is presented.

Paul and Barnabas testify from their experience of God's Grace in the mission field. Not only has Paul experienced the powerful visionary call to the Gentiles but that call has been blessed by an enthusiastic response.

The witness of the Church is that the world has begun to open to the Gospel.

Secondly, Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, Jesus' very own 'founding rock', testifies to the same vision and its place in the fulfilment of Christ's command to evangelise the world.

Third, James, head of the Jerusalem congregation, turns to Holy Scripture and rehearses the Biblical evidence to demonstrate that, far from being at odds with God's prophesied plans, this move is already foreseen and the inevitable direction of authentic Salvation History. On the basis of these three contributions, the decision is taken.

The Apostles send a letter to all the churches confirming the decision of The Church.

Notice the pattern....

- 1) What is the living experience of the obedient and Spirit filled Church?
- 2) What does Holy Scripture say? Because the Holy Spirit of God does not contradict Himself?
- 3) Is it ratified by the authority of Peter, exercising, as promised and by the gift of the same Holy Spirit, the authority of Christ?

The life of the Body of Christ, the Church, the inerrant teaching of Holy Scripture, the Christ given authority of the Magisterium of the Petrine Office. The decision is made. The letter is sent.

'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...'. The Church remains united – One Holy Catholic and Apostolic.

This remains the pattern of the Church to this very day.

At the Jerusalem Council of A.D. 50, this determinative pattern ensured that the Jesus movement would not peter out into an obscure Jewish

cult. Rather it would fulfil its destiny, under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit and both remain and become the One, Holy, Apostolic and Catholic – Universal Church of Christ.

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