



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

6th Sunday of Easter Year C

The First Council

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

Good morning boys and girls. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.
Hansel and Gretel went into the wood. Then they came out.
And they lived happily ever after.

Wasn't that a wonderful story?

Of course it wasn't. The point, purpose, lesson, excitement, adventure, moral of the tale are missing. This is the fate of this morning's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. It has, as so often happens in the lection, been edited to death by the compilers who, presumably, fear that Catholics cannot bear too much of the Word of God and would thus prefer incomprehensibility to longevity.

Why does this matter? Well, the reading to which I refer is of huge significance to everything that has happened in the Church since. It is an account of the very first Council of the Church and it lays down some very important principles. We, of all recent generations, know the importance of Councils. It is sixty years since the Second Vatican Council and, though few will really recall the pre-conciliar days, the writings of the Council remain the yardstick against which everything is tested and around which most

arguments rotate. Of course this should not be the case, for several reasons. As Pope Benedict XVI was keen, frequently, to emphasise.....Councils do not stand alone. The Councils of the Church are intended to be consequential and cumulative. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit on the life of the Church is not contradictory. He is not fickle and changeable. So Benedict talked constantly about 'the hermeneutic of continuity' as opposed to the 'hermeneutic of rupture'. The truth maybe presented in different ways but the truth remains inalienable. Vatican II was not at liberty to trash the Council of Trent any more than The Council of Lyons would have sought to undo the Council of Nicaea. To think like that is to adopt a purely Protestant approach where private opinion trumps revelation and tradition, where modernity and the spirit of the age reign sovereign over the wisdom of the ages. This is to contradict the Holy Spirit of God, which, according to Jesus, is the only unforgiveable sin. It is also, on a daily basis, to invite a circular and self-referential tyranny. We become prisoners of the culture rather than liberators of the lost.

This becomes even more significant when we live in the wake of a Council whose principal documents, though available, are largely unread by the faithful and much that is attributed to Vatican II is not in the documents of that Council.

So the principles on which Councils rest is ever more vital and this is where today's eviscerated passage is so important. This, the Council of Jerusalem, takes place in c. 50 A.D. It is summoned to address a huge and pressing question. On its deliberations hangs the future of the Church and our place in it.

The question is simple. Is the Ekklesia of God to remain a Jewish Sect or become the Universal Church?

The reason that this question arises is that the mission of the 'Followers of the Way' – Christianity's original name – has gone via Paul, Barnabas, Philip, Peter etc to preach in synagogues. Some have welcomed the Gospel. Others have rejected it. To many Christians' astonishment, the Gospel has been welcomed by many Gentiles, outsiders, pagans. They have 'converted'. They have been baptised. They have consequently exhibited gifts of the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? It is one thing for the miracle of the Pentecost to send thousands of pilgrim Jews back to the four corners of the known world (you remember that tongue twisting list in Acts 2 – Pamphylia , Phrygia, Cappadocia, Parthia etc) to spread the good news in the Jewish Diaspora that the Messiah has come. It is quite another to embrace the pagan converts from whom they have faithfully kept ritually separate. Thus the scene is set for a momentous decision. Should the Church remain exclusive or become inclusive? This sounds a very modern question but it is not. The inclusive option is certainly not an 'anything goes' resolution. It is a working out of John's key Gospel text - 3 v 16 - whosoever believes in me – who follows the Way. Can I be a follower of Jesus?

It is a big decision for the Ekklesia.

So the Council is summoned. The missionaries are welcomed and give account of their experiences on the road. The objectors to the inclusion of Gentiles put their case. There follows a long discussion. Then Peter, the senior apostle speaks. He recounts the experiences of the mission field and the undeniable activity of God's Holy Spirit in the lives of the Gentile converts. This reduces the assembly to silence. Then, finally, James speaks.

He is the leader of the Jerusalem Church and, it is clear, is the best hope of the objectors. He is the 'conservative' – small 'c'. His response is critical to the future of the Church. James does not get carried away on a tide of emotion and the excitement of the moment. Rather, he examines the claims from the point of view of the 'traditio'. He turns to the Word of God, the Holy Scripture. This is vital.

His conclusion is summarised in an obscure text from the prophet Amos. In that text is encapsulated the understanding of the vocation of Israel, the vocation of the People of God. This vocation is, at once, exclusive and inclusive. God called Abraham to be the father of the chosen people. The Chosen People do not exist for their own sake but that, through them, the world might be blessed. Throughout their history there is a tension between the exclusive and the inclusive. The strain of exclusivity you find in, for example, Exodus and Judges and Ezra. The inclusivity is at work in Isaiah, Zechariah, Jonah & Ruth, for example. Both strains are correct. The Church/the People of God are useless if they simply become captives of the culture. Endlessly bleating, 'Be nice. Don't be mean', won't cut the mustard. WE PREACH SALVATION.

We have failed our vocation if we do not reach out to the world to convert it. James concludes that the Gentile mission is a valid continuation and fulfilment of the calling of God's people and imposes the requirement that the incomers renounce all association with demonic paganism and are sexually continent. The pattern is set for the Councils of the Church. Evidence. Yes. Debate. Yes. But overarching all, the touchstone of authenticity – the continuity and coherence of the Word and the Spirit. Exclusively committed to following the Way, that is Christ.

Inclusive of all, who would walk beside us with that singularity of purpose.

The hitherto obscure but burgeoning Jewish Sect is on its way to fulfil the mission of the Messiah by becoming the Universal Church.