



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

6th Sunday of Easter-Year C-May 26th 2019

***Readings: Acts 15: 1-2, 22-29, Psalm 66, Apocalypse 21: 10-14, 22-23,
John 14: 23-29***

My first churchwarden, Sid Langley, an elfin hot type printer with a shop just off the East India Dock Road, was a mine of simple and sensible advice.

On preaching Sid advised:

‘Don’t get in the pulpit and argue with yourself. Just tell us.’ By which he meant that he wasn’t interested in the minutiae of theological debate. Normally I follow Sid’s advice to the letter. Today I feel an overwhelming need to deviate. Bear with me. It’s the creators of the lection, the readings for Mass. They have a nasty habit of skipping chunks of vital Scripture and eviscerating the text of meaning and purpose. Two weeks ago we were treated to a feisty debate between the Apostles and the Sanhedrin. At the end of this firm but gentlemanly exchange we were told that the Apostles were glad to have been humiliated for the Faith. Puzzling? It certainly was. The lection had omitted the key verses recording the humiliation – a damn good flogging. Not such a gentlemanly chat after all.

Today they are at it again. Acts Ch.15 is the account of the first real Council of the Church – The Council of Jerusalem. It is vital, decisive,

determinative and sets the pattern for all the great subsequent ecumenical councils of the Church up until Vatican II. Today's lection – notice the missing verses 3 – 21, introduces the question and leaps on to the solution. This may seem, at first glance, an ideal edit. Who, today, wants to know about some antiquarian debate about the rights and wrongs of circumcision or Jewish dietary law?

The problem is that, on this apparently obscure debate, hangs the very future of the Universal Church and the key to the correct solution lies in the *process* – herewith omitted.

We are in early mission territory. Some Jews are accepting Jesus as Saviour. Some are rejecting Him. Many Gentiles, pagans, are turning to Christ, recognising the God of Israel, beginning to fulfil the prophecies that all men would come to know the one true God.

Some of the convert Jews insist that pagan converts must keep the Jewish Law. Paul, remember, Pharisee of Pharisees, was converted to mission the Gentiles. He, at once, sees that such a demand will never be met – indeed need not be met because the Law has been fulfilled in Christ Himself. The prospect before the earliest church is therefore one of inbuilt division. One table for kosher Jews. One table for Gentiles. Two altars. No mixing. No common church. No sacramental unity. Schism from its very foundation. Paul is fighting for the future of the Faith.

The *process* then becomes very important. How does it work?

1)The question is brought to the assembly of the leaders of the Church, the Apostles and elders, the Christ appointed authority.

2)There is, what Scripture describes as 'much questioning' – both in the sense of getting to the facts and also agonising about the answer and all that hangs on it. Faith is not a fairytale. It is evidence based. What happens is important. We are an incarnational religion. The facts of the prayerful lived experience of the mission and ministry are a living reality.

What has the Holy Spirit of God been doing? Remembering always that God is not inconsistent.

3) The assembly, apprised of the facts thus far, then hear from the first Pope, Peter, the appointed of Christ. He outlines the realities of the history of the development of the Faith. The inclusion of the Gentiles may be a cultural shock but it is the longstanding intention of God to use His chosen people for the salvation of the whole world. Peter tells them that that God, 'the heart-knower' has acted sovereignly to grant His Holy Spirit to Gentile believers.

4) The critics are silenced and then the assembly listens to the mission experience of Paul & Barnabas – the dynamic power of God at work in the mission field. Remember Paul & Barnabas always began in the synagogues but usually then found willing Gentile hearers too. Mission begins in the Church but inevitably bursts out of the doors to the most unlikely places if we are moved by God and He speaks to the hearts of those seekers.

5) Finally James speaks. He is, in many ways, the leader of the conservatives. He, after all, will bear the brunt of leading the Jerusalem Church and be martyred for it. James reflects on the Biblical promises of God for the salvation of Man and the vital role of the Jewish people in that divine plan. The Mission is discovering the ancient promise and prophecy of God. (We may still ask the question, 'Who else in the history of Man, fulfils these words other than Jesus?') Holy Scripture coheres. The Holy Spirit of God is consistent.

These then are some of the governing principles of the Conciliar Church. We meet Together. We assemble and discern the Facts of the Faith. There is informed questioning, discussion. Peter speaks. The Mission field reports. The Holy Scripture tests and confirms the consistent witness of salvation. Thereby is unity maintained – that most sacred gift.

And that is the key to the Councils. We move forward together in unity. The problem with the Reformation is not that the Church did not need reform – it did. The problem was that Luther et al cut loose from this great conciliar process and set in train a series of events that would ensure that the Protesters who broke from the Universal Church would have, as their abiding characteristic, constant and recurring schism. The hundreds of thousands of churches that populate the non-Catholic world, separate tables, separate altars, separate doctrines, separate ethics are a living testimony to the tragedy of the abandonment of the Apostolic process.

For all the faults of the sinners who make up the Catholic Church we remain united – one family – one altar – one people. It is what we pray for at the Peace. ‘Look not on our sins but on the faith of your church and graciously grant her peace and unity in accordance with your will’. It is what St. Paul fought for at the Council of Jerusalem.

One common table. One altar. One people of God.