

## **Fourth Sunday of Easter (Cycle C)**

(Acts 13:14,43-52; Rev 7:9,14-17; John 10:27-30)

My family used to like to collect little sayings that were just off the mark, like "I never saw a green tie that I didn't notice" (unless you notice a thing, of course, you don't realize you've seen it); once we heard someone come out with, "as I always say, 'little things come in small packages'." The saying, of course, is "good things come in small packages"--and it's often true; for example, expensive jewelry. And it certainly is true of today's second reading and gospel, both of which are very brief and very precious.

I remember Abbot Alban once saying, with reference to that second reading, that there is something very comforting about that "huge crowd which no one could number" standing before the throne--"comforting" because the bigger it is, the better the chance we think we have of being in it.

Actually, this "great multitude" cannot be properly understood without the opening of this chapter, with which it stands as the second part of a diptych, i.e., the signing of the 144,000. The Book of Revelation, is an apocalyptic composition, and, as most apocalyptic writings, sees humankind divided into two groups, the faithful, the elect, the chosen, "the servants of our God," and those who are persecuting them (in this case, the Roman Empire, but Rev refers to them as "the inhabitants of the earth," the ones whose names are not written in the book of life, who worship the beast, who are deceived by the beast, who have

had intercourse with Harlot Babylon). There are going to be several series of seven plagues, but they cannot begin until "the servants of our God" have received the seal upon their foreheads. You can think of it as a seal of approval, if you wish, but its function is protect them from the plagues that are to come on "the inhabitants of the earth." Once they have been sealed, the plagues can begin.

Although it speaks of 144,000 sealed from all the tribes of Israel, this is symbolic; it is the square of 12 (the number of Israel in apocalyptic) multiplied by a thousand. This a symbolic way of representing the new Israel, a NT designation for the Christian community. I doubt that there are still fundamentalists around who believe it means the number of the saved--it would be a pretty small percentage of the billions of souls God has created. Jehovah Witnesses do believe it's the total number of those who go to heaven (others can enjoy and earthly happiness), and they can know who they are. Jim Miller, our Oblate of happy memory, who came from a JW family, said his mother was supposed to be one of the 144,000.

The rest of the chapter, which I call the other part of the diptych, presents a clearer and happier picture, with its "great multitude, which no one could number, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. The two parts of the diptych represent the same group, the one symbolically, the other in more concrete terms. It also reminds us of that first Pentecost Sunday and of that great crowd of pilgrim from all over--Parthians and Medes, Cretans and Arabs, Judeans and Asians, Egyptians and Libyans, and how they

all accepted the preaching and were baptized into one body through the coming of the Spirit. In another way it is reminiscent of today's first reading, also from Acts, which shows Paul and Barnabas turning from their attempt to convert Jews to the Gentiles, who heard them gladly, so that the believers now swell to a multitude no one can number and encompasses those from all peoples and all tongues and colors.

It also fits nicely with today's gospel of Jesus the good Shepherd. Although it reminds us of the parable of the Good Shepherd, it has closer affinities with a passage in Ezekiel. Elsewhere in this chapter of John, Jesus contrasts Himself with the robber who does not enter at the gate and with the hireling who flees when the wolf comes, so also in Ezekiel's oracle, the LORD begins by excoriating the bad shepherds who slaughter the fatlings, pasturing themselves instead of the flock, and ends--this is the LORD GOD Almighty--by saying, "As a shepherd tends his flock ... so will I tend my sheep." Half a millennium later we have Jesus, God Incarnate, saying the same thing. Jesus proves He is not a hireling who flees when the wolf comes; as He says, "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." This is metaphor rather than parable, but there is nothing symbolic about laying down His life for the sheep; it is what we celebrated during Holy Week.

When Jesus says, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd,"

we have again the universalistic note we found in the first two readings--the apostles now proclaiming the gospel also to the Gentiles rather than to Jews alone, and so we have that crowd impossible to number of Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Egyptians, Libyans, Jews, Cretans, and Arabs which made up the early Christian community.

We who live in a primarily Gentile, primarily white society, can tend to forget this universalistic aspect, but that would be to our loss. We are intended to recognize and appreciate the richness of our heritage. There is no room for xenophobia, racism, sexism, or the like. As St Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for me, but also for all those others. The unity that Christ desired and prayed for to His Father, "that they may be one as we are one," can be attained only by imitating the Good Shepherd--not necessarily by laying down our lives, but at least by loving all others as Jesus did, by being a servant to all, as Jesus was.