

6th Sunday of Easter (C)
(Acts 15:1-2,22-29; Rev 21:10-14,22-23; John 14:23-29)

I'm sure none of you find the Scripture readings at Mass too long and boring (the readings I'm asking about, not the homily). How many do? Yet the liturgists who put the lectionary together seem to have been constantly worried about them being too long, and so shortened readings by dropping out portions--even though which are needed to understand what is left. Take today's first reading, for example. It follows a report of the success of some of the early missionary activity among the Gentiles at Antioch. At Antioch emerged a fervent community of Gentile Christians. It was there that the disciples were first called Christians. This is the background for today's first reading. The first two verses tell us that Jewish Christians coming from Jerusalem insisted that these new Gentile converts had to be circumcised and made to observe the Jewish law. This left these new Christians perplexed and disturbed. Thus the proposal in today's reading that a delegation should go to Jerusalem, where the matter could be authoritatively decided by the Apostles.

Our reading, however, here leaves out the 20 verses in which the matter is decided. At this "Council of Jerusalem," the first to speak are those demanding observance of the Mosaic Law by these Gentile converts. They are answered by Peter and James. Peter reminds them that these Gentile converts had received the Holy Spirit, just as they themselves had, and goes on to assert, most importantly, "we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they." James continues by reminding them that the prophets had foretold the conversion of the Gentiles to the Lord. And he proposes the observances the Gentile converts are to follow, which are the embodied in the letter they carried to Antioch and elsewhere.

But this was not the end of the matter. Paul had to compose

two of his most important epistles, Romans and Galatians, against those whom he calls "false brothers," those who are still trying to force Gentile Christians to adopt Mosaic practices. The central point he makes is this: "if justification comes through the law, then Christ died in vain" (Gal 2:21). This is what Easter is all about: God's Son died to redeem us and it is only through Him that we are saved. And if we are saved through Him, He is the way, and there is no other.

Paul makes his point time and again: "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). He tells us that "the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; ... , and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'... Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom 13:8-10). It is by faith we are saved; therefore, "in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). "The whole law is fulfilled in one statement, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:14).

Is all this of importance to us today? Yes! Immensely important. First of all, if the Gentile converts had been required not only to believe the gospel and renounce their pagan ways, but also to put on the "yoke of the Law," there might have been many fewer converts and most of us would not be here today. Or if we were, we would have to be learning and observing the 613 provisions of the Mosaic Law.

The Rabbis spoke of "the yoke of the Law." Jesus, opposing His own way, had said, "Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; my yoke is easy and my burden light." But the law of love, which is His way, is not really that easy. It's interesting to note the difference between John and Paul in this matter of the way of love. The way of love for John is always "love one another" or "love the

brother(s).” In John’s gospel and the three Johannine epistles the phrase "love one another" or "love the brother(s)" occur 15 times. This is good advice for a monastic community, but does it go far enough? Jesus had said, "Love your enemies" (Sermon on the Mount). And when asked who is the neighbor referred to in the command to "love your neighbor as yourself," he gave as an example the despised Samaritan. "Neighbor" does not occur in the Johannine literature. It occurs six times in Paul, not only as "love your neighbor as yourself," but also “each one should please our neighbor,” and even “no one should seek his own advantage, but that of his neighbor.”

Remember, Paul travelled the world converting people. For him the "neighbor" was all those many peoples he encountered, even those in far-off lands. Let us not close ourselves into our own comfy little enclave, excluding all others, as some politicians would have us do. We should realize that our broad, rich, fertile country belongs not to us but to God, and should be open to all God’s children, our brothers and sisters. This is illustrated in Israel's law of the Jubilee. Land cannot be sold in perpetuity, and every fifty years a Jubilee year is proclaimed, a time at which land which had been sold reverts to original owner. The reason is stated as follows: "The land shall not be sold irrevocably; for the land is mine, and you are but resident aliens and under my authority" (Lev 25:23). When Israel disobeyed the Lord, their land was taken away from them and their fields divided up among their enemies. So, too, in spite of our conviction that “it’s too big to fail” could our country fail if we selfishly try to hoard it for ourselves in a short-sighted attempt to “make America great again.”

The second reading leaves us with happier thoughts. It is, in fact a picture of the end-time. It builds on last Sunday’s second reading, which, speaking of this same heavenly Jerusalem, called it God’s dwelling with the human race, using a variation of the ideal formulation of the covenant, “you will be my people and I will be

your God,” now embracing also the Israel of the new covenant. This scene is really an alternative presentation of what is found earlier in Revelation, where is a description of a great multitude “from every nation, race, people, and tongue” standing before the throne of God (Rev 7:9-12). This vision of all peoples is possible only because of the decision of the First Council of Jerusalem that underlies (but is not reported in) this morning’s first reading.

And this is what Easter is all about. Christ died for all, all those of “every nation, race, people, and tongue.” This redemption is offered to all, with or without the Mosaic Law. What we are called to is the law of love. And we don’t choose between John’s love for the brothers and Paul’s love for the neighbor. All people are our neighbors and all neighbors are our sisters and brothers. This is the light yoke, the easy burden Jesus calls us to take up, that we *must* take up, in order to share Jesus’ Easter joy with Him and His saints.