

5th Sunday of Easter
May 18-19, 2019

Opening the Door of Faith

Readings: Acts 14:21-27; Revelation 21:1-5; John 13:31-33A, 34-35

Throughout the Easter season our first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. The Old Testament is on hiatus during Easter. Being very much drawn to facts, places, geography and the like– the Acts of the Apostles has all those aspects and more. I readily acknowledge that many of the details contained therein are of less value to the Christian of the 21st century because much of its history has become obscured over time.

These regions such as Antioch of Pisidia and place names like Derbe, Lystra and Iconium mean little or nothing to any of us in 2019, though Saint Paul’s letter to the Galatians would have been addressed to just those people. The place names cannot be found in a modern atlas– they are mostly distant memories, though Google Earth occasionally comes to the rescue. Our culture prides itself on efficiency over history.

Though close to 40 years ago, I recall quite vividly when a classmate asked a teacher who was making an historical point, “How is any of this going to help me get a job?” Absent a direct application of the knowledge, such information was deemed useless. This is a utilitarian approach. How can this benefit me to the highest possible degree right now? What do all these places and names have to do with my faith here and now?

The utilitarian approach, popular though it may be, presents a special challenge to those who work in Church ministry. Years ago, when giving a Confirmation Retreat as a last-minute substitute, one student walked in and immediately raised his hand, “How long will we be here?” Would that same question had been asked if he were given tickets to a game?

St. Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, is relating the travails of the early Church and thereby providing us with important information about the zeal, the hardships, and the growing pains of being apostles.

The key event in today's account of the first missionary journey is the experience of Paul and Barnabas at Antioch of Pisidia (modern day Turkey). "From there they sailed to Antioch of Pisidia, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now accomplished." This was key because their message in the synagogue was favorably received. Gentiles were even beginning to listen to the apostles, only increasing the hostility of the Jews toward the apostles.¹

So ends the first missionary journey of the apostle Paul, a journey of some 1200 miles over a period of two years (46-48 AD). Close to 10,000 miles would be covered later on at the end of all the missionary journeys. There were also disagreements over what would be the best approach to take. There were hardships, both physical and spiritual.

Paul and Barnabas were giving an account of themselves, an end of the year report card, about how the Lord had worked in their lives and in the lives of those to whom they spread the Word. Acts uses the language of "**opening the door of faith**" to the Gentiles. That is indeed an apt image of faith, that of opening doors. The bigger question though, may be, once the door is opened, how do we encourage people to enter?

In some respects, we are the doorkeepers, period. We open the door, but we do not take people with us against their will. The Church proposes, the Church invites. The Church teaches and does so authoritatively, as is her mission. Yet, she neither imposes, nor coerces. Following our Lord, we respect the tremendous gift of free will bestowed on us by our Creator.

We believe that the saving message of Christ will ultimately wipe away our tears, though it is not a guarantee of protection against tears. Jesus Christ will make all things new, while at the same time allowing us to wallow in what is old, so should we choose. The task of those who minister in Christ's name is to throw wide open the doors, to reveal the light that dwells therein.

¹ See New American Bible footnotes from Acts 13:4-14:27).

Jesus told the disciples in today's Gospel that he would be with them only a little while longer. It was indeed wise of him give fair warning of his impending departure, lest they fail to cherish every last moment, every last word of encouragement. It is as if Jesus is begging them to value the moment, to live in the present, even with an eye to the future.

Today, right in the here and now, we can abide in God's love, we can share and spread the Good News, and we can show gratitude for His blessings in our lives. God's dwelling is with the human race. It is here right before our eyes. We thank the Lord for gracing us with the ability to see this and to cherish it. The Easter season isn't over quite yet. Let us rejoice and be glad.