

6th Sunday of Easter – C

The Easter season is moving along quickly and next Sunday we will celebrate Jesus' Ascension into heaven. As we head towards this feast day, when Jesus departed from his disciples to ascend into heaven, our Gospel reading gives us some "final" words of Christ which actually come from his final discourse to his apostles at the Last Supper. Even though they come from the Last Supper, they are appropriate to hear before his Ascension because in them Jesus speaks about his imminent departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So Jesus is preparing them for his departure by telling them that He will still be with them yet in a different way, and also that he will send his Holy Spirit to serve as their guide through this life. He tells them that the Holy Spirit will be their teacher and will "remind you of everything I have taught you." And of course, one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit that he promises is peace – and what a valuable thing is peace; it can seem

like such a rarity in this world, both in the wider world and in our own hearts. But the Lord *does* want us to be at peace and for that reason he promises to send his Holy Spirit.

And it was not long after Jesus ascended into heaven that there arose disagreements in the early Church. We hear of perhaps the biggest early theological disagreement that arose in the early Church in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. This reading might not at first sound very edifying with its talk of circumcision and avoiding eating the meat of strangled animals; we might wonder why we hear this particular reading at Mass today. But there is in fact a connection with Jesus' words in the Gospel!

Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus had established His Church here on earth and entrusted it to his apostles and their successors. Jesus gave us His Church to serve as kind of like a ship that carries us through the storms of this life to eternal life. And as

I mentioned, Jesus also promised his apostles that he would give the Church his Holy Spirit, one of whose fruits is peace, who would be their teacher and their guide.

So in our first reading we hear about this first big theological disagreement and how the early Church came to resolve it. A little historical background is necessary here: virtually all of Jesus' followers in his lifetime were Jews. But after he ascended into heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Jesus' disciples began to go out into the streets of Jerusalem and then travel to the surrounding towns and regions proclaiming His death and resurrection. Soon, many non-Jews or Gentiles also became followers of Jesus or members of the New Covenant. But two theological groups soon formed: one, largely headed by James, believed that members of the New Covenant, including Gentiles, first had to become Jews or members of the Old Covenant before they could become members of the New Covenant. This would

have meant that they would have had to undergo circumcision and would have had to follow the rigorous Mosaic Law. Another group, largely headed by Paul, believed that this was not the case: that the New Covenant had replaced the Old Covenant, and so it was no longer necessary to maintain these Jewish practices. So the early Church had a bit of a conundrum on its hands: how to resolve this significant difference? Jesus himself had not addressed this issue, nor was there anything in the Scriptures, which at this point in time would have only included what we call the Old Testament, that likewise would have addressed it. So, the first leaders of the church, the apostles and elders, i.e. the first bishops, gathered together in Jerusalem – they had the first council in the history of the Church – to resolve this issue.

Throughout her history, the Church has at times had to deal with significant theological questions. Numerous heresies have arisen which have challenged the Church and her faithful.

Historical events have presented new and unique challenges to the Church, and sometimes Scripture does not directly address the different issues that have arisen. But that's why Jesus 1) established a Church in the first place, and 2) sent his Holy Spirit to inspire and guide the Church. God of course knows that anytime you get two or more people together, sooner or later they are going to disagree about something. Sometimes these disagreements are about matters of taste or opinion and not about actual doctrine or Church teaching and so are really not that important, and there is then room for some differences. But other times these disagreements can be about very fundamental aspects of our faith. The Bible is a big book, or I should say a big series of books, but it doesn't cover every single theological question or issue that has arisen in human history. However, Scripture does give us principles from which the teachings of the Church have then been developed. But the Church, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is necessary to serve as the guide or the authority to help us navigate

the many new issues that arise. Without the teaching authority of the Church, anyone can interpret the Scriptures any way he wants and can find a way to justify almost anything. This has happened throughout history, and continues to happen. So how do these conflicts get resolved? Who decides? Again, that is why Jesus gave us the Church and promised to send his Holy Spirit to serve as our teacher and guide, through the teaching authority of the Church.

And ultimately the fruit of this is peace. If everyone serves as his or her own authority, however, there is endless conflict. And then the most powerful end up rising to the top, regardless of whether they are good, moral, or just. Might makes right. And in our day, how this often plays itself out is through the politicization of absolutely everything. Because we live in a fallen world, and because the Kingdom of God has not yet come to fulfillment, we see how this dynamic continues to dominate in the world. We are

not yet living in a world where justice and right prevail all the time and everywhere. So we continue to live in a world of conflict.

But the Lord desires that we be at peace. That doesn't mean appeasement, however, because appeasement doesn't usually lead to true peace. It doesn't mean abandoning the teachings that our age might find difficult to accept in order to maintain some kind of false peace. Nor does it mean always finding some kind of middle ground or compromise on every issue, because this again only can create a false peace; in the end it doesn't truly resolve anything. To truly have peace, it's necessary that we live in the Truth. But because our fallen world does not live in the Truth, we continue to experience conflict.

However, Jesus gives us another way: a way that will lead to peace within our own hearts, and a way that would lead to peace throughout the world if our world ever learned to accept Truth.

Yes, we can and should certainly strive for peace and justice in this world, but at the same time understand that we will find neither true peace nor complete justice in this life, but rather in the next.

Our second reading from Revelation points to the next life, that time of rejoicing and complete happiness and total peace that is yet to come. While we strive for peace in our own lives and in the world, we must always keep our eyes on the next life, when the Lord will bring everything to fulfillment and will give us true peace.

- May 25, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake