

Sixth Sunday of Easter A/2008

The disciples who fled the persecution and found refuge in other cities of the Roman Empire had done a tremendous job through their teaching and brought into the Church people of different cultural backgrounds. How would the initial Church in Jerusalem react with regard to these new converts? Would they be accepted and integrated into the Church, or would they be left out?

The book of the Acts tells us that once the Apostles in Jerusalem heard the good news of the conversion happening among the gentiles, they all rejoiced. They sent Peter and John in order to comfort them and pray over them for the reception of the Holy Spirit.

By visiting these newly baptized, Peter and John show that the mother Church in Jerusalem keeps the bond of unity with the new Churches born from the work of the dispersed disciples. This episode teaches us that new communities can be formed wherever someone proclaims the word of Jesus; but they cannot grow up independently from the other communities. They must have communion among themselves and with the universal Church. That is why Peter and John prayed for the newly baptized so that they, too, receive the Holy Spirit as he was already given to them.

To receive the Holy Spirit, and to be confirmed as disciple, does not mean, necessarily being free from trouble. To be a disciple, indeed, is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus by accepting suffering for the sake of God's kingdom. That is what Peter highlights with force in the Second reading.

For Peter, in fact, persecution is a sharing in the suffering of Jesus and a way to glory. When someone suffers for the witness he bears to his faith, he is walking in the way our Master Jesus walked and sharing the cross our Master carried. We know, however, that the suffering of Jesus led him to the glory of the resurrection. In that sense, by sharing in his suffering, we will share in his resurrection. If we remember that, anything we suffer in this world for the sake of Christ becomes a privilege and not a penalty. Then Peter can say: "Rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly".

In the same way, to be insulted for the name of Christ becomes a blessing, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us. The idea Peter is pursuing with this development is that if we have to suffer as Christians, it should be in the way that gives glory to God and to the name we bear, and not because we are evildoers. For that, the life and the conduct of any Christian must be at all points exemplary and without reproach. When a Christian suffers, he should not be ashamed, but glorify God because of the name of Jesus.

All that helps us understand why, when his time had come to leave this world and to go to the Father, Jesus prayed for his disciples who were to stay in the world so that they may be protected from evil, as we heard in today's Gospel.

First of all, Jesus asks the Father to glorify him so that through him the Father might be glorified, too. He had accomplished on earth the work for which he was

sent in the world, that is, to give eternal life to the world. He has made God known to people in the world and made them certain of God's love for them.

Jesus has loved totally and completely those the Father has given him in the world to the point of giving up his life on the cross for our salvation. Now he wants that the glory he had before the creation of the world might be given to him again in heaven. As he came from God, he has now to return back to God.

In all that, he has given glory to God his Father. Like the children who bring honor to their parents by their obedience, Jesus brought glory and honor to the Father by his perfect obedience until death on the cross.

When Jesus speaks about eternal life he has given to those who have accepted him, what does he mean? Eternal life is to know God and to know Jesus whom the father has sent. As such, eternal life is not at all about the duration of life, but the quality of life, that is, the sharing in the very life of God. Eternal life is entering into the intimacy of God through Jesus Christ. We possess that life right now when we keep the word of the Father brought to us by Jesus. We enter into a new life and share something of the life of God himself, when, through the work of Jesus, we discover who God is for us and how he loves us.

To know God is therefore not merely to have intellectual knowledge of him; it is to have an intimate personal relationship with him, which is like the dearest and nearest relationship in life. Without Jesus, such intimacy with God would have been impossible. It is Jesus who taught us that God is our Father whose name and nature is just love.

Another thing we learn from this prayer of Jesus is what it means to be a disciple. Discipleship, indeed, is based on the realization that Jesus is not anyone, but someone who came from God. Disciples, therefore, are people who have realized that Jesus is God's ambassador, and that in his words we hear God's voice, and in his deeds we see God's action. Disciples are those who see God in Jesus and are aware that no one in the whole universe is one with God as Jesus is. Disciples are those who keep God's word as they hear it in Jesus.

A simple consequence to draw from such a statement is that, if we wish to do our will and not that of Jesus, we will hardly be his disciples. If we act independently from Jesus' action and guidance, we cannot be his true disciples. Discipleship involves submission to Jesus and realization of his word. As we approach the feast of Jesus' Ascension into heaven, let us be assured that he is with us and takes care of us as he prayed to his Father. We are truly in God's hands, whatever might happen to us, because this is the will of Jesus who intercedes for us before the Father. May God bless you and give you his strength to abide in him through Jesus Christ. May God bless you all!

Acts 8, 5-8. 14-17; 1 Peter 4, 13-16 (from 7th S); John 17, 1-11a (from 7th S)



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