

Sixth Sunday of Easter (C) – The Church: Shame and Glory

There is an obvious contrast between the pictures given of the Church in today's first Reading, and that given in the second - and it has a bearing on our present experiences in the Church, which I hardly need to elaborate.

In the Acts of the Apostles St Luke describes the **confusion** experienced by the community of the faithful, and the efforts that they have to go to resolve their dilemma and find the right way forward. There are *disagreements, arguments, problems*. People are *disturbed* and *unsettled*. It is a situation familiarly human. People are in the **dark**, darkness has fallen.

Then, in the Apocalypse, St John shares his dream of the future of the Church, radiant with the glory of God. Confusion has given way to **clarity** as the love of God shines through like light in a diamond. It is a vision which gives hope and encouragement to the People of God as they struggle on their pilgrimage of faith.

Now we in our turn are confronted daily with our own humanity and the humanity of the Church – all the faults and failings which belong to our fallen nature. But we must never lose sight of the Divine Presence that *dwells amongst us*. We are people – but we are the People of God. A promise has been made to us:

Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of time.

Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.

We can look at the Church of which we are a part and see only the sins and shortcomings. There is, certainly, much in our story as individuals or as a community that gives us cause for shame. There are aspects of the Church's past history and present life that certainly do not reflect the love of the Lord. Today we are invited by the Scriptures to recognise, confess, and repent of these things.

But there are also many features of the Church which are **glorious** and which reveal the goodness and holiness of God. Human frailty and sinfulness is only one side of the picture: there is also much evidence of Divine Grace at work – it shines out in countless examples of human courage and selflessness and trusting obedience to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

An example of this is given today in St Luke's story of the circumstances which were the occasion of the first Council in the history of the Church: the Council of Jerusalem.

We heard how the Spirit of God guided the apostolic community into a clearer understanding of the Christian Life. Traditions must be respected for the values that they enshrine, but they must never become an oppressive burden that deprives us of our spiritual freedom.

That story is one of **enlightenment** – in every sense. The faithful came to understand more clearly what God expected of them. The problem was resolved, and the Church took a step forward.

In the subsequent history of the Church there have been many more examples of human confusion and error, many more Councils, many more resolutions and reforms. Step by painful step the Church advances into a fuller understanding of herself and of her vocation in this world: the building up of the Kingdom of God on earth, the raising up of humanity to Godliness.

There have been successive ‘enlightenments’ down the centuries to our own times. In every generation the Church must come to recognise how best to reflect the light of Divine Love to the world in which she exists. And in every generation there have indeed been, and are, individuals and communities within the family of the church who are just that: **shining lights** revealing the wisdom, the compassion, and the generosity of God.

These exemplars should give us **pride and joy**. They should renew our confidence in the abiding presence of the Risen Lord, and stir up afresh in us the desire to be ourselves more truly what we are called to be.

A city seated on a mountaintop cannot be hid. We are the Church, and society looks to us to proclaim God’s truth and to display God’s love. Hence society is very critical - and justifiably so - when we fall short in this responsibility one way or another.

We pray today that the Lord may show us the way forward – in our own **personal** lives, in our **parish community**, in our **diocese** and in the **universal** Church.

We are often **in the dark**. We sometimes **bring darkness upon ourselves**. But we must sustain the belief that we still enjoy the companionship of Jesus and that the power of God’s Holy Spirit will sustain us through our own life and through human history. It has in the past, it can in the present, it will in the future that is yet to come.

Using the words of today’s Psalm (66) we could, as Pentecost Day approaches, ask for the guidance and encouragement of the Holy Spirit to be poured out afresh upon us all.

O God be gracious and bless us.

Let your face shed its light upon us.

May your ways be known upon the earth.

May all nations know your saving help.