

## Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C

The First Reading of today's Mass is taken from the Acts of the Apostles: the story of the action of God's Spirit in the early Church communities. We learn today of the conclusion of Paul's first missionary journey. The Church in Antioch sent him along to assist Barnabas. It was the year 47AD some 13 years after Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. This journey, through the south of the Province of Galatia (now part of Turkey) had momentous consequences for the development and spread of the early communities of Jesus' followers. As today's reading asserts: 'God opened the door of faith to the pagans (that is, to those who were not Jews)'(Acts 14:27). This represents a practical, historical, action of the statement made by God in the Second Reading: 'Now, I am making the whole of creation new'(Apocalypse 21:5).

In spite of the very clear statement made by Paul in his First Letter to Timothy: 'God our Saviour wills *everyone* to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth'(1Timothy 2:4), and the equally clear statement of Jesus himself: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw *all* people to myself'(John 12:32), many religious groups, including Catholics, picked up the bad habit of thinking that to be saved people had to belong to their Church. Since Vatican II a Catholic can no longer think that way, and every Pope since has insisted that God's love is universal. Of course people are free to reject God's offer. Everything depends on how each person acts honestly according to his or her knowledge and conscience. 'The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable' writes Paul. 'God wants to be merciful to *all*'(Romans 11:29,32).

The world is full of good people who are responding to grace, whether they realise it or not, in striving for the truth and in responding to situations in love. In his 'Theological Investigations' Volume 14, Karl Rahner speaks of people all over the world, in every culture and in every religious community, who are welcoming God's offer of communion, whether they realise it or not. He writes:

'This [welcoming of grace] proceeds from the innermost heart and centre of the world and of the human: it takes place not as a special phenomenon, as one particular process apart from the rest of human life. Rather, it is quite simply the ultimate depths and the radical dimension of all that which the spiritual creature experiences, achieves and suffers in all those areas in which human beings achieve their own fullness, and so in their laughter and its tears, in their taking of responsibility, in their loving, living and dying, whenever a person keeps faith with the truth, breaks through his own egoism in his relationships, whenever he hopes against all hope, whenever he smiles and refuses to be disquieted or embittered by the folly of everyday pursuits, whenever he is able to be silent, and whenever within this silence of the heart that evil which a man has engendered against another in his heart does not develop any further into external action, but rather dies within his heart as in a grave – whenever, in a word, life is lived as a human being would seek to live it, in such a way as to overcome his own egoism and the despair of his heart which constantly assails him'(pages 167-168).

The Church is not an ark keeping those inside it safe from the flood of evil that surrounds it. It is the Body of Christ, a beacon for the world keeping alive the revelation of Jesus - a revelation of love. It is in the world to remind everyone of how loved and embraced each person is. How important for Christians, then, is the command of Jesus in today's Gospel: 'love one another as I have loved you' ... by this love everyone will know that you are my disciples'(John 13:34-35).

It is the same with the sacraments. We must not look at them as graced interventions that belong to the Church in an otherwise graceless world. They are special moments that manifest what God is doing everywhere in the world. In the sacraments are manifested what is going on at the heart of the human condition. The Christian community is saying an explicit "Yes" to what God is doing throughout the world. The conferring of a sacrament, including as it does the "Yes" of the recipient, brings about a surge of grace, the grace which is already and always working at the heart of creation.

As the Second Vatican Council assures us, the Church is a sacrament of salvation (life) *for the world*. In 'the world' grace is hidden. God is drawing people to his heart, wanting everyone to know 'the truth' by experiencing consciously the wonder of divine communion. This conscious experience is what is experienced and celebrated in the Church and publicly announced to the world.

When we baptise a baby we are manifesting the love that God is offering every baby. How good it is to know that every baby is conceived and born innocent and in the embrace of God. Everyone from conception is surrounded by God's love. This wonderful truth is explicitly celebrated in the sacrament of Baptism, when a person is embraced by the Christian community. God's love-embrace, however, is there for everyone, even though they may not realise it. Not realising it puts a person in danger of living a distracted and ill-directed life. Would it not be good for every mother and father to know and celebrate what God is offering them?

The Church's mission is to bring everyone to know, and so to 'live to the full'(John 10:10). Ask those who have joined the Church as adults. Ask them about the joy of knowing and belonging. God was loving them before their baptism, but now they know this and they know the joy of belonging in a community that knows it and that continues to reach out to the world, proclaiming this Good News, however imperfectly. We who experience the privilege of enjoying the sacraments of the Church's liturgy should do all in our power to attract others to know how amazing is the love of God, and the longing of the heart of Jesus that everyone experience the freedom of living a full human life in conscious communion with God.