

[Readings: Acts 15:1-1, 22-29; Psalm 67; Rev. 21:10-14; 22-23; John 14:23-29]

"Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid," Jesus says in the familiar translation of today's Gospel. This is not the easiest of His teachings to follow, not by a long shot. Our hearts are routinely troubled for lots of very good reasons. Our elders are sick, our children are wayward, money is tight, employment is insecure, the world is a violent place, and the future is by no means certain.

Each of us could make a list of our current troubles, and the paperwork would lengthily roll down the aisle and out the door of the church. We might not even have room for the existential troubles: human limitation, loneliness, the search for meaning, and death. One could argue that anyone who is not troubled is just not thinking hard enough!

Theologically, we could say that trouble is just another word for the effect of Original Sin on our world. As the story goes, God created a world free of trouble, sorrow, and death, but human beings freely chose the mess of evil over the perfection of divine love. Add thousands of years to the mix, and what you get is what we experience in the 21st Century: a chaotic and increasingly wasted environment full of unhappy people making distressing choices.

How can Jesus ask us not to be troubled by this?

Christianity had its start in dissent and argument. As we say in pious imagery, the Church emerged from the wounded side of Christ, and Jesus was clearly no stranger to trouble. His ministry, words and signs together, comprised a confrontation with authority both secular and religious. Jesus is Lord and Savior, but He was also a troublemaker of the highest order. He went to the cross for it, and His Church began as a faction within Judaism destined to rupture quite inelegantly.

A generation later, Paul and Barnabas run into resistance everywhere they traveled, as the clash between Jewish practice and Gentile exceptions intensified. Jerusalem became the epicenter of the debate, as the contest

between Jewish and Gentile Christians reached critical dimensions. What can we learn from the First Church Council at Jerusalem?

First of all, that there are two sides to every story. We get Luke's version of the council in Acts of the Apostles, but it's quite a different meeting than what Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians. Were Paul and Barnabas summoned by church elders, or did they go up to the city of their own volition? Was this a private consultation or a public debate? What was the result of the council: four rulings about dietary restrictions and marriage, or one mild recommendation to remember the poor?

However the matter was resolved, the decision not to press circumcision on Gentile converts was pivotal. It sealed the fate of the Church in regard to its precarious position as a subset of Judaism.

When I was an Associate Pastor at a parish with a grade school, I had Mass with the primary grades (1 through 3) one morning. The third grade lector came up to me before Mass and said, "Father, I don't know what this word is. Circumcision." I said, "I will explain that when I get to that point in my homily." When I got to that point in my homily, I asked the students, "Do you know what circumcision means?" They all shouted, "No, Father." And I replied, "You know that would be a great question to ask your mom and dad when you get home!"

No doubt, not requiring circumcision of the Gentiles caused great anguish for Jewish Christians who felt loyalty to both identities. Though the lifting of compulsory circumcision was a great relief to Gentile converts at the least, many Jewish hearts were greatly troubled by the imminent expulsion from their first spiritual home, the Temple in Jerusalem. This was their home all their lives, from infancy to adulthood, where God lived 24/7, and now they were forbidden entrance to that part of their spiritual home.

But there would be an even more majestic and eternal temple for them and for all believers and righteous people, as we see in today's Second Reading.

John's vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem is one of calm and radiant perfection. Here, we might imagine, the human heart at last might not know trouble. The splendor of precious stones and the regal order of angels, gates,

and directions reveal a complete absence of the chaos and confusion that attends most earthly dealings. Even those primordial divisions of day and night are healed, as this city needs no sun or moon. The Lamb is its lamp, and darkness is permanently banished.

John is offered this vision as an assurance of what will be, but also as a reminder of what already is. In God's reign, which is not consigned to the future but is a reality in every moment, the Holy City waits alongside of and in a real sense slumbers *within* the earthly city. Do we wish to know this kind of absolute peace, which the world obviously cannot give? All we need to do is to invite the Holy City, also known as Thy Kingdom Come, to arrive in full into our lives. This idea might cause a tremor. People of faith often confuse Thy Kingdom Come with the end of the world or the hour of death.

Thy Kingdom Come is when God's will is done, mirrored on earth as it is in Heaven! That is not a future event or a final one, but the consequences of an act of will. When we align our will with the Divine Will, John's vision becomes staggeringly real in us.

As the hour of his death draws near, Jesus bequeaths His peace to His friends. This peace is not like the fragile mortal truces that come between wars, or the cold silence of people who are not fighting, though they also are not talking to each other. The peace of Jesus is not a line drawn in the sand to keep the punches from landing on their intended targets. His peace is supernatural; it is real, it is final. The enmity that sin created and that has fractured human history is healed and bridged, once and for all, in this holy peace.

If we believe this, can our hearts be troubled? Not really, certainly not ultimately. We hold in faith the vision of the perfect city and its serene glow and know it exists in the present hour as truly as in a time yet to be. We can choose citizenship in this city now, and warm ourselves in its radiance through every holy decision. If we make God's will our own, trouble will have one less foothold in our midst. That is the Holy Spirit that is here, right now, in this church on this holy ground, in this people.

How do we encounter Christ? Usually, through other people. Often,

through the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Mass. How do we grow in our faith? Intelligent and inspiring homilies. Music that moves our soul. Stepping outside of our comfort zones in ministry and service. How do we witness? Simply by being the best version of ourselves that God created us to be.

When we take our faith seriously, it is a big and awesome job. But we do not live it out alone. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Comforter, is there to help us. Call on that spirit and pray for the peace which only He can give. Learn, read, pray. Then you and I can understand and teach and guide others to Christ. To be that role model to advise and counsel and bring comfort, support and safety to others. You are not alone. Be at peace. AMEN! ALLELUIA!