

Readings for the 7th Thursday (and last) of Easter

FIRST READING: Acts of the Apostles 22:30; 23:6-11

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles:

Wishing to determine the truth about why Paul was being accused by the Jews, the commander freed him and ordered the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin to convene. Then he brought Paul down and made him stand before them. Paul was aware that some were Sadducees and some Pharisees, so he called out before the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees; I am on trial for hope in the resurrection of the dead." When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the group became divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, while the Pharisees acknowledge all three. A great uproar occurred, and some scribes belonging to the Pharisee party stood up and sharply argued, "We find nothing wrong with this man. Suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" The dispute was so serious that the commander, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, ordered his troops to go down and rescue Paul from their midst and take him into the compound. The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage. For just as you have borne witness to my cause in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness in Rome."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 16:1-2a and 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

Keep me, O God, for in you I take refuge; I say to the LORD, "My Lord are you." O LORD, my allotted portion and my cup, you it is who hold fast my lot.

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

I bless the LORD who counsels me; even in the night my heart exhorts me. I set the LORD ever before me; with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed.

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

Therefore my heart is glad and my soul rejoices, my body, too, abides in confidence; Because you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption.

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

You will show me the path to life, fullness of joys in your presence, the delights at your right hand forever.

Keep me safe, O God; you are my hope.

GOSPEL: John 17:20-26

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Lifting up his eyes to heaven, Jesus prayed saying: "I pray not only for these, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them

and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me. Father, they are your gift to me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world also does not know you, but I know you, and they know that you sent me. I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 7th Thursday (and last) of Easter

The Easter Season ends on Pentecost Sunday. For the past weeks, after Easter, we have read the saga of the apostles, especially Paul. He has shown a penchant for getting into trouble. He has been seemingly fearless in his preaching of the Gospel. This former bounty-hunter and hit-man who persecuted, arrested and participated in the killing of the followers of Jesus, has become, through the grace of God and direction of the Holy Spirit, one of the greatest of the apostles and whose preaching was recorded in his letters. We read of his life's work in the Acts of the Apostles. His Epistles constitute the earliest writings of the New Testament. He traveled to cities and towns all over the eastern Mediterranean coast and today we have heard of his impending trip west to Rome. After today's reading there are but two more, Friday and Saturday's.

There is a little trivia for me to share. We believe that Paul died by beheading. This is not recorded in any scripture. As a matter of fact the only deaths of the disciples of Jesus recorded in scripture are Judas, (Matthew and Luke tell conflicting stories of his demise) Steven, the first martyr, and James, the head of the Church in Jerusalem. The rest of the disciples' deaths come to us from Tradition.

We believe, as Catholics, that there are two sources of divine revelation which come through the Church. Scripture, as its name implies is written. Tradition is more oral. Both date back to the early Church. The book of acts ends with Paul living and greeting people in Rome for two years. It ended there. Scripture does not relate what eventually happened. The Acts of the Apostles told the story of, well, the apostles' actions. It is concerned with what they did, their preaching, teaching and service, not in the manner of how they died. It is about their lives in faith, not their deaths in Christ. This is important to bear in mind. They gave witness through their acts. The word martyr means witness in Greek. The message of acts is about how they lived. The living witness was more significant than being dead.

Paul had a reputation to be wily, quick in thought to turn a situation, by his wits, to his advantage. He did this today by focusing the conflict away from him to the theological divisions between the Sadducees and Pharisees. The story began with Paul being investigated and accused of being a trouble maker. The conflict actually resulted from Paul preaching the gospel of Christ and spreading his faith in Jesus as the Messiah among fellow Jews and poaching potential converts away from Judaism. What would we do, if gathered together for mass on Sunday and having the Eucharist being interrupted by some preacher trying to recruit us to a new faith?

I have always thought this episode to be one of the best strategic uses of spin for personal advantage. This conflict set Paul on his course to Rome, the heart and capitol of the Empire and

the culmination of Paul's mission as an apostle. The Spirit may have prompted him, but his actions were the means. The Acts of the Apostles began with special effects that showed the power and wonder of the first coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Here we have a story of the Spirit's ways and movement in a way more familiar and common to our experience. The Spirit worked within the chaos and trouble that involved Paul. Paul found a way through it like we do, by the seat of his pants.

John's gospel comes close to the end of the Last Supper and Jesus' final discourse. It began with chapter thirteen. Chapter eighteen begins with the scene in the Garden across the Kidron Valley and Jesus' betrayal and arrest. Listen closely to Jesus' opening words. He prayed for us! We believe through the word of those who have believed in the millennia before us. Jesus also prayed for those yet to believe after we are all dead and living with Jesus forever. Faith for Jesus is alive and transforming through the ages and through all who have believed, those of us who now believe and the believers to be born.

Out of this notion of continuity, we find the roots of the oneness Jesus promised. We are one, in him, with all who have believed, all who believe now and those who will believe. In this oneness we are one with Jesus too. In our oneness with Jesus we are one with God. The unity we have now will be complete when Jesus returns to finalize forever the Kingdom of God. We share in God's glory. God's glory comes through the process of fulfilling God's plan of salvation. In Jesus' incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Spirit God revealed God's plan. The plan of salvation began before creation and is revealed to us as we move to its fulfillment in the Kingdom. God's love is the plan's source. God has shown glory through acts of love that lead us to salvation.

May God's love remain in us, always.

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