

6th SUNDAY OF EASTER (Cycle A)
May 29, 2010 -- Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

“Send forth your spirit and they shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.”

Today we continue with our reading of the Acts of the Apostles. Last Sunday, we heard of the selection of “seven reputable men” to wait on tables, so the apostles could devote all their time to preaching the gospel. At least in a broad sense, that represented the origin of the ministry of the deacon – seven men commissioned to do works of charity and service.

The apostles “laid hands” on them. The contemporary view seems to be that this was not an “ordination” in the sense that we understand it today. Maybe so, maybe not. Saint Stephen was the first martyr of the church, and is often referred to as a “deacon.” Maybe so, maybe not. I don’t have a dog in that fight. But those seven men are at least our “spiritual ancestors.”

Anyway, these men were commissioned to do works of charity so that the apostles could go out and preach the gospel. I’ve always thought it was interesting that we never actually hear of them doing that – Stephen immediately went out and started preaching, and got himself martyred for his trouble. Today, we hear about Philip, another one of the seven deacons, going to Samaria to preach. Instead of waiting on tables, Philip is out preaching in Samaria. Typical deacon, I guess, tell ‘em to do one thing and you can be sure they’ll do something else.

Maybe it was reverse psychology. Maybe they told them to do one thing knowing they’d do just the opposite. People do that sometimes. Kind of like my cousin Stumpy. We used to call him Henry, until we told him not to stick his hand in the wood chipper.

Anyway, I don’t know who ended up waiting on tables, but it sure wasn’t Stephen or Philip.

Philip goes out to Samaria instead. He may not have understood it exactly that way, but he goes out to renew the face of the earth. If you’ve been keeping up with the news, Samaria is one of the disputed areas that Israel has controlled since the 1967 war. It’s been the subject of a lot of

discussion and conflict the last few days – or maybe for the last few months, or years, or decades, or centuries. Samaria is sort of north of Jerusalem, in the high country along the west bank of the Jordan River. It's an area that's been in need of renewal for a long, long time.

Whenever we hear of "Samaritans" in the New Testament, it seems apparent that there was no love lost between the Jews and the Samaritans. Now, it's an oversimplification to suggest that "Samaritans" and "inhabitants of Samaria" are exactly the same people. But still, there was some tension there. The Samaritans only accepted the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, had some worship practices that the Jews thought were strange, and they didn't care for the Jews any more than the Jews cared for them.

So off Philip goes, into sort of a "strange land" on his missionary journey to Samaria. Kind of like going to Frayser or something.

Philip is off to a strange land to spread the gospel. We are hearing today of the beginning of the missionary journeys of the early Christians, the church's mission to spread the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and to Samaria and eventually to the ends of the earth.

He goes to spread the gospel, and to baptize. He goes with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Yet it's interesting to me that they had been "baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus," the Holy Spirit had not yet fallen upon any of them. It remained for the arrival of the Apostles Peter and John to come and pray for them and lay hands on them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. This was the institution of the sacrament of confirmation to sustain them and help them truly live an adult faith.

They're going to need all the help they can get, as Peter tells us. "Be prepared," is what Peter tells us. If we're going to be Christians, we'd better be prepared – because we *will* be persecuted – it's "*when*" you are maligned, he says. Not "if," but "when." It's not smooth going, this business of following in the footsteps of Christ. Persecution is always an impending reality.

That's why Confirmation is not just a pre-graduation social event. It really is a radical choice to live the Christian life, which is counter-cultural to just about everything we encounter in the secular world. And that's why it's

such a joy for me to look out in the assembly and see former students, former altar servers, adults that I knew as children, persevering in their faith.

I read one time that man is a being with opposable thumbs, who walks upright on two legs, and imagines himself the prince of creation. But for all the technological progress we have made, there are certain forces of nature that we simply cannot stand against. Just in the last few weeks, we've seen earthquakes, floods, tornadoes . . . for all our imagined powers and abilities, we're helpless to control everything. In so much of the world, everything seems sort of tired and sad and worn out. Most of us here live in relative comfort, but all of us are just about one tank of gas away from a major paradigm shift.

Being a Christian in today's world can also involve a major paradigm shift. We go in the power of the spirit, knowing that there is a difference between what is and what ought to be, and opting to try to bring about what ought to be in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

We are all called to do our best. We can't do any better than our best, but many of us are blind to our own failings. We think we're doing our best when we're really just making excuses. It's just who we are. It's just "human nature." A. A. Milne wrote that, "No doubt Jack the Ripper excused himself on the grounds that it was human nature."

I recently read something written by a very learned Dominican. He pointed out something about the virtue of Hope that I'd never thought about.

He said that some people think they can be saved without keeping God's commandments – that God will somehow overlook and excuse their "human nature." He suggested that they have an excess of the virtue of hope – presumptuousness – and that's a form of despair.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are those who believe that they cannot be saved no matter what they do – because of the weaknesses of their "human nature." He suggests that this is also a defect of the virtue of hope . . . and also a form of despair.

Hope is not despair. We should always have hope, but not presumptuousness or despair. We are who we are, but we look to the Holy

Spirit for hope. Peter asks us to be able to explain the hope in us, and to do this we need to develop a clear understanding of who we are and what we are all about.

None of us has an answer or an explanation for everything. But there is no contradiction between knowledge and faith. There doesn't have to be a conflict between seeing things as they are, and as they should be. It can help us see what our job is.

Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest
And in our hearts take up our rest
Come with thy grace and heavenly aid
To fill the hearts which thou hast made.

READINGS

Reading 1

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17

Philip went down to the city of Samaria
and proclaimed the Christ to them.
With one accord, the crowds paid attention to what was said by Philip
when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing.
For unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice,
came out of many possessed people,
and many paralyzed or crippled people were cured.
There was great joy in that city.
Now when the apostles in Jerusalem

heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God,
they sent them Peter and John,
who went down and prayed for them,
that they might receive the Holy Spirit,
for it had not yet fallen upon any of them;
they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
Then they laid hands on them
and they received the Holy Spirit.

Responsorial Psalm

Ps 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20

R. (1) **Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Shout joyfully to God, all the earth,
sing praise to the glory of his name;
proclaim his glorious praise.
Say to God, "How tremendous are your deeds!"

R. **Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

"Let all on earth worship and sing praise to you,
sing praise to your name!"
Come and see the works of God,
his tremendous deeds among the children of Adam.

R. **Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

He has changed the sea into dry land;
through the river they passed on foot;
therefore let us rejoice in him.
He rules by his might forever.

R. **Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Hear now, all you who fear God, while I declare
what he has done for me.
Blessed be God who refused me not
my prayer or his kindness!

R. **Let all the earth cry out to God with joy.**

or:

R. **Alleluia.**

Reading 2

1 Pt 3:15-18

Beloved:

Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts.
Always be ready to give an explanation
to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope,
but do it with gentleness and reverence,
keeping your conscience clear,
so that, when you are maligned,
those who defame your good conduct in Christ

may themselves be put to shame.
For it is better to suffer for doing good,
if that be the will of God, than for doing evil.
For Christ also suffered for sins once,
the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous,
that he might lead you to God.
Put to death in the flesh,
he was brought to life in the Spirit.

Gospel

Jn 14:15-21

Jesus said to his disciples:
"If you love me, you will keep my commandments.
And I will ask the Father,
and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always,
the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept,
because it neither sees nor knows him.
But you know him, because he remains with you,
and will be in you.
I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.
In a little while the world will no longer see me,
but you will see me, because I live and you will live.
On that day you will realize that I am in my Father
and you are in me and I in you.
Whoever has my commandments and observes them
is the one who loves me.
And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father,
and I will love him and reveal myself to him."

THEME OF THE READINGS

Today's Readings refer to the missionary age of the Christians and the presence and guidance of God's Holy Spirit to be given to them. In his letter to the scattered Christian communities, St. Peter urges them to be ready to engage others in order to explain Christian expectations. It is an attitude of openness and the capacity to communicate what we believe and why we believe, a presentation of the Christian faith done with gentleness and reverence. St. Peter implies that suffering is a likely consequence of preaching. It is interesting that St. Peter characterizes Christianity by its hope, its expectations of what is to happen because of Christ.

Both St. John's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles refer to God's Holy Spirit, who is to come to Christians. Jesus calls him the Advocate, the Spirit of truth who will live in the hearts of Christians to console and to guide them. While the presence of the Holy Spirit is a free gift of God's love, it is only received by those who want and prepare themselves for it. Jesus also promises his own spiritual presence in Christians, reminding us that genuine love of God is shown by living a Christian life.

The Acts of the Apostles shows Peter and John imparting the Holy Spirit to Samaritans (known for their eclectic religion and only partial acceptance of the Old Testament) through the sacramental imposition of hands.

The praises of Psalm 66 may sound strange to our secular ears. The psalm reminds us of the greatness of the Lord's works, that the whole world bows down before the awesome power of God.

DOCTRINAL MESSAGE

The presence of the Holy Spirit: Christianity is a life within us, a permanent, real experience of God that we receive in Baptism and, in the Latin rite, is completed at the age of presumed physical maturity in Confirmation. The presence of God's Holy Spirit strengthens and enlightens the Christian to fulfill his Christ-like life and mission on earth. We possess the Holy Spirit and we are thus moved and enlightened without being dispossessed of ourselves. We still determine our lives freely. The Holy Spirit helps us discern the relative value of all things in relation to God's wisdom, and to act accordingly. The Spirit strengthens us to acknowledge God as Lord and Creator. We are strengthened to fulfill the mission of Christian

evangelization, with gentleness and reverence, in spite of obstacles and persecution.

Catechism references: paragraphs 683-690 refer to the Holy Spirit; paragraphs 731-741 refer to the Spirit and the Church in the last days; paragraphs 1285-1321 deal with the sacrament of confirmation.

The explanation of the faith: St. Peter asks us to be able to explain the hope in us. This requires a clear understanding of the essential realities that sustain Christian experience, and how they are compatible with what we know of other realities. This is not an easy thing to do, but it offers a great promise and respect for human knowledge. Christians are not to be afraid of the advances of human knowledge, nor are we to run away from things that are difficult or impossible to explain. The Christian does not have an explanation or an answer for everything. There is no inherent contradiction between knowledge and faith. Knowledge is enhanced by the experience of Christian faith; faith can guide the search for human knowledge. We know that life and reality is complex. Christianity does not simplify or bend the facts; it keeps us open, and hopeful, in a broadening search for meaning and salvation.

Catechism references: paragraphs 904-907 refer to the participation in Christ's prophetic office; paragraphs 2471-2474 deal with the Christian duty to bear witness to the truth.

PASTORAL APPLICATIONS

Many pastors have had the experience of witnessing the confirmation of a group of eighth-graders and, perhaps, have the sensation that, in spite of the hard work, the sacrament has not always been received in the most conscious manner. It is certainly true that, though a sacrament may be validly administered and received, its subjective effects depend a lot on the dispositions of its recipient. Do kids consider themselves as preparing for Christian warfare, for the struggle for self-mastery and the mission *ad gentes*?

Probably not. What is to be done? Give them confirmation and hope that later on in life they will come to realize the effects? Wait until later in life to administer the sacrament and risk sending them on unanointed, spiritually unfortified and unenlightened? At times we do not even have the

opportunity to ask ourselves these questions as “confirmation time is coming around again” and it cannot really be put off.

We know what confirmation means and implies: a radical choice to live the integral, counter-cultural Christian life. We know it goes contrary to what is considered a normal way of life. If confirmation is not to be merged into some sort of pre-graduation social event, then we need to start to do things differently. It is the pastor, the priest, who sets the standard.

Parents need to learn the radicality of a Christian calling and be actively involved in the Christian formation of their children, even if they have to acknowledge their own failings. From the first days of school the Christian faith and its practical consequences must be presented, and not just in religion class and not only in words. Christian standards on media use, dress, social events, apostolate, prayer and sacraments, vocation work, the witness of Christian youth and adults, a sense of the Christian community... Too much? Idealistic? Impractical?

Let us have the courage to see things as they are, and as they should be, and the grace to start, or to continue.