

**The Church of the Holy Trinity,
Rittenhouse Square,
1904 Walnut Street,
Philadelphia, PA 19103**

May 6, 2007

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year C

Preacher – The Reverend Terence C Roper, Rector Emeritus,

Revised Common Lectionary

Texts – Acts 11:1–18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1–6

John 13:31–35

Theme – The Resurrection in Practice

When you heard the first reading today, Acts 11:1–8, were you struck by the enormity of it? Imagine! We complain that the Church is beset by issues today: Ordination of Women Priests and Bishops; Ordination of Homosexual Persons, male and female; Blessings of same sex couples in Unions or Marriages; Ordination of Homosexual Persons, some living in committed relationships, to the diaconate, priesthood and episcopate to name just the hot ones. Issues? We have a bundle!

Last year I heard Bishop Desmond Tutu speak on Issues. What a champion of God he is! What a small, wiry bundle of Holy Spirit! He said, and I paraphrase, “Ordination of a homosexual? Would you divide the Church over that? The Church has not divided over far greater issues than homosexuality. That is not something over which to divide the Church.”

What greater issues had Bishop Tutu in mind? Steeped in the scriptures as he is, he may have had in mind just such an issue as is related in the lesson from Acts today. There’s an issue with a capital I.

Compared to that situation described in Acts 11:1–18, almost anything is a breeze.

Picture the situation in the time of Acts. A great gulf, a division existed between Jew and Gentile that was so deep, so profound, so

fundamental, so absolute, that bridging it was inconceivable, unimaginable. Jews and Gentiles did not mix, period. The Jews held derision, and the Gentiles had a ready and equally scornful response.

For the emerging Christian Church a major problem was looming on the horizon. All the time that membership in the newborn Christian community was limited and confined to Jews there was no problem, but when the first Gentiles professed belief, underwent conversion and asked for baptism things got sticky.

Some of the faithful Jewish Christians lost it. By that I mean that they lost sight of the real issue under a dust storm of secondary, minor issues. "Make Jews of them first and then let's see," they demanded, and others wanted to set up conditions and restraints to which Gentile converts must first subscribe before being allowed to join the Christian community. How divisive!

This problem may have happened a long time ago, but please don't think that this is some abstract matter, something that busied the brethren long, long ago, something that does not concern us, please.

This debate was of the most profound significance for us because we are the Gentiles under the hammer here. It's our membership, yours and mine, that's in question.

The Jewish Christians, the circumcised, were appalled that Peter had treated the first Gentile converts as equals. He had even eaten with them. Again, this needs a word of explanation because you and I treat eating with people other than members of our families as something of no great moment. Indeed, most of us relish it. Eating with people is great! It's how we get to know people.

For 1st Century Jews, and hence for 1st Century Jewish Christians, as for most of the people of the Middle East then and now, inviting someone to eat with you, to enter your home and eat with your family, inviting them to sit down and share food was a statement of the most profound significance. In effect, the invitation changed the relationship between you and your guest. From that moment on you were intimates. You could never be the same. You became in essence "family".

Not so today. I've had people in my house for a meal whose names I have long since forgotten, and whose visit I have also forgotten. Such a situation would have been unthinkable for them in those days.

In the Acts lesson today we see put into practice Jesus teaching concerning the law. He said that he had not come to destroy the law but to fulfill – to open it up in all its richness. He removed all the stumbling blocks and made all to become one family. All became one family in God. Here that teaching is put into practice.

Notice that Peter is challenged by none other than the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, the real cream of the crop. He responds by telling a story. It's a story with a meaning. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

That message is worked out in practice in Peter's visit to Caesarea where the story of an angel's message to the householder lends weight to what is to follow. As Peter spoke to the assembled Gentiles the Holy Spirit descended upon them as it had done first to Peter and all the others in the Upper Room. Then Peter's shares his reasoning, proclaims the theology on which his action is based.

"If God then gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus, who was I that I could hinder God?"

I go on and on about this, as I do, because this story is among the biblical stories that shows unmistakably that the Spirit is not confined within the borders or the Church's imagination nor of its customs nor of its canons. The Spirit is free and moves as the Spirit will, not necessarily according to our preferences and certainly not in line with our prejudices. Where the Spirit rests the picture is much, much bigger, always much bigger than we are comfortable in allowing it to be, or than we are ready for it to be. We want to reduce it to a manageable size, place it in a suitable frame, hang it on a wall, when in fact it is far, far too big for the wall, the room, the house, or indeed for the whole world itself.

Remember, when you are tempted to bar the way, slam the door in someone's face, that were it not for the amazing vision of Peter, Paul and the others you and I would have no place at all in the picture. We would forever be second class citizens, second class

citizens at best, in the Kingdom of God. That was not God's plan for us.

Notice too, before we leave this text, what it is that the converted leaders of the Church said, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to eternal life." "Repentance" is the gift too, you see. We are given the gift of repentance so that we may know ourselves for who and what we are and that we may receive the absolution of grace from the God of Grace. Without the grace that comes from repentance none can hope to come before God nor hope to survive, let alone live in and through God.

It's this marvelous holy hope that radiates through the Revelation to St. John the Divine. Martin Luther wanted to place the Book of the Revelation in a category by itself at the end of the Bible because he felt it to be so unlike anything else in the corpus of the other texts that it should be separated from them. That's where it is, although not for Luther's reason.

It is work unto itself, a marvelous theological fantasy of hope, hope proclaimed in the midst of impending disaster. I find that same hope ringing out loud and clear today in spite of the upsets and turmoil in and around the Church.

I treasure its vision of newness, a new heaven, a new earth, a new created order. It reminds me powerfully that when God comes in it is a new Spirit that enters. How true that was when Peter went to Jerusalem. It was not a breath of fresh air that he brought; it was a hurricane of holy hope.

Any Christian who has taken this good news to heart must surely have found Psalm 148 appropriate first in its praise to God in the heavenly realms and then following in the earthly realms. The immensity of the vision of the psalmist is directly in line with what we have heard in our Acts and Revelation readings. There's no room for small stuff here. This is the great vision of God. This is the great God I AM breaking through the narrowness, the meanness, the pettiness, of this world within the Church and beyond the Church. It calls us as believers to be bigger and better and more God-like in the way we respond as membership of the Body of Christ.

Look now at the gospel! It confronts us briefly but directly. It's a tiny little fragment from the Last Supper story as related for us by John. See how it ties all together!

Judas has gone from the room. Yes, but more significantly, Judas has gone from the table. We know why and we know the significance. He does not belong at that table anymore, does he? Once he did and was family; once he belonged, but not anymore. He has excommunicated himself! Judas has sacrificed his place of privilege and honor, for the price of 30 pieces of silver. Oh, Judas! What have you done?

Judas is gone, gone out alone into the night, and Jesus turns to the eleven. He delivers his farewell address that begins with a brief, brief reference to glory – the glory of the Father and of the Son, and the glory the Father has in the Son, the glory of the Son in the Father.

He then tells them he is going, and that they will see him no more. “You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews, so now I say to you, “Where I am going you cannot come.”

Then he gives them the New and Great Commandment, “That you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Then he followed that with words that to me have always seemed terrible. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.” Love, Christian love, is not a matter of talk; Christian love is deeds, deeds that witness to the love within, to the Christ within. Wow!

Love, as Jesus used it in reference to the Father's love, and in reference to his love for us and in reference to our love for one another is not a shallow veneer of love. It is a robust and dynamic love that makes enormous demands both on the giver and on the receiver. Christian love is based in the new relationship that is enjoyed by those that have given been the divine grace, the grace of repentance by God Almighty. The personal pettiness that so often bedevil our lives as well as the deep rooted hatreds and dislikes we inherit as part and parcel of our culture and class have no place in this love. This love surmounts all such. Indeed, the thought that we may hold onto such ugly sentiments, even unwittingly, ought to be

sufficient cause for concern to bring us to our knees in repentance in even our best moments.

There are too many warnings in the scriptures against assuming a righteousness that one does not own, and too many warning against pride in all its many manifestations for us to be deluded into thinking they cannot apply to us. Today's gospel is an ocean of spiritual wisdom packed into a very small bucket.

Last Sunday our Senior Warden, David Godfrey-Thomas, informed me of the indisposition of our Rector, the Reverend Alan Neale, and of his admission to the Malvern Institute for treatment of addiction to alcohol.

As you know, during this past week a letter has been sent from Mr. Godfrey-Thomas to all members and friends of Holy Trinity informing us of this crisis in Alan's life and in the life of our Church.

How shall we respond in Love?

Our first duty is to pray earnestly both for Alan and for Wendy, and to beseech God to do what is best for them in this time of their tremendous need, and to pray God also to strengthen and support the staff and the people of this congregation as we work out what is best for all concerned. This we do not in despair but in hope.

The disease of alcoholism is not likely to be a new thing to anyone in this congregation. I think I might be right is assuming that it has touched each of us personally in some way or another. If we are not sufferers from of it ourselves, we probably have relatives or friends that are, and we know only too well the devastating effects it often, if not always has, on all concerned, even remotely. The prevalence of this problem in our society means that the disease and the treatments for it are well known and readily available. That does not make the malady itself any easier to bear. It still falls to the family and friends, and we have the privilege of the family role here because Alan and Wendy are members of our parish family as well as leaders in it; it still falls to us to bear a burden.

This development is a sad and bad blow to the Neales and a sad and bad blow to us, the faithful here, but it is not such a blow as we

are unable to sustain and surmount in due course. We are resurrection people; people of holy hope.

Mr. Godfrey-Thomas's action in writing his letter has assured that this traumatic event in the life of the Neales and of Holy Trinity cannot become the elephant in the living room around which everyone walks but about which all are silent. There can be no pretense. The elephant is known and has been named. It is Alcoholism. And in due time and in God's good grace it will be tamed.

Holy Trinity can gain from this experience. We do not have to lose by it unless by our actions we pursue that result. If we do pursue the wrong path we shall get what we pray for, as they say, and be the poorer for it in many ways, but if we make this a plus for us, a plus for the ministry not only of Alan but a plus for the ministry of us all we shall make resurrection.

I do not believe that God has sent us this crisis because I do not believe in that sort of God, but I do believe that God is able and will enable us to make a positive out of a negative, a blessing out of a misfortune, resurrection out of death. That's why we go first to prayer, and then to repentance – cast no stones lest you hit yourself in the eye – and then we go into action.

In this church there is room for all, as you heard the message in Acts today. In this church God is praised by all, as you heard the message in the psalm today. In this church there is hope, always hope, no matter how troubled the waters around us, as you heard the message of Revelation today. In this Church there is love, as you heard the message of the gospel today and every day, day after day, to the people of the resurrection.

If there is not; if there is not all of these things then Christ is not risen in our hearts. The resurrection in us is a fraud, and we are deceived and deceivers. But, of course, that is not the Holy Trinity that I know and love and respect. That is not the Holy Trinity to which I turn when I look for evidence of the resurrected Lord. No, we are a Church experiencing resurrection, experiencing the Lord rising up from the grave, departing the empty tomb, indwelling our hearts. Yes, indeed!

So be it! Amen