



Father Ambrose Bennett

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Paschaltide, 2010, Year C

In today's readings from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard a description of the apostolic Church in her earliest days, just a few years after our Savior's death and resurrection, around 45 A.D. It was a time of political regime change: the Emperor Claudis placed Judea and Samaria directly under Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great. This meant that the Church no longer had even the limited protection afforded by Roman law. For the sake of safety and in order to evangelize, the apostles left Jerusalem for the outlying areas. James, the son of Zebedee and brother of John, remained in Jerusalem to guide the Church there, and was soon beheaded on the orders of King Herod Agrippa. The King then had Peter arrested and imprisoned, with the intention of executing him as soon as the Passover celebrations were over. To the King's fury, Peter escaped miraculously, went to Antioch in Syria and finally to Rome itself, where he would eventually be martyred.

It was in the midst of this situation that the Holy Spirit spoke to the Church at Antioch while they "were making liturgy to the Lord" (Acts 13.2), instructing them to set apart Paul and Barnabas for the mission. Paul and Barnabas were already witnesses for Christ, but it is through the Church and the laying-on of hands that they receive authority to go on their missionary journey. They began to evangelize beyond the bounds of the land of Israel, in the city of Antioch and then in Asia Minor, beginning in the synagogues. Paul and Barnabas preached Christ and performed miraculous signs, and many believed, including even a Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus. At one point, the people at Lystra were so impressed by Paul's healing of a cripple that they hailed Paul and Barnabas as gods, calling them Zeus and Hermes, and tried to offer sacrifice to them! And yet, the very same people of Lystra soon turned against the apostles and stoned Paul, dragging him outside the city and leaving him for dead. One moment, the crowds gave them garlands and worshiped Paul and Barnabas; and in no time at all, the same crowds were demanding their blood. As in the life of Christ our Savior, there is often a short transition between the hosannas on Palm Sunday and the cries of "Crucify him!" uttered only a few days later.

Now perhaps you can see why the apostles said that "through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14.22). Along with the miracles and conversions and consolations of the Holy Spirit, there were persecutions from without and also dissensions and scandals within the Church. There was the case of Ananias and Sapphira, who had lied in order to deny to God the temporal goods that they had promised for the Lord's service. Also, at one point, Paul and Barnabas, who had been so close, quarreled so bitterly that they parted company and walked together no more. It seems from 1 Corinthians that the quarrel was eventually resolved, and St. Paul speaks of Barnabas as his tireless fellow worker in the gospel of Christ (1 Cor 9.5-6). The Acts of the Apostles depict a vital Church, filled with the Holy Spirit, and yet with the same sorts of troubles



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that beset the Church in every age. Those who want to return to the alleged purity of the apostolic age need to read their New Testament more carefully!

Our reading from the Book of Revelation shows us a different picture of God's Holy City, the New Jerusalem, "coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21.2). A great voice says, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people" (Rev. 21.3). Now the literal Greek word translated as dwelling is *skene*, which means "tent" or "tabernacle." This recalls the Tent of Meeting in the desert, when the Lord made his presence known among his people; the late Temple was also called the Tent or Tabernacle. Notice the words: "the dwelling or Tent or Temple of God *is* with men"—not *will be* but *already is*. Already in Christ, God has made his dwelling among men: when St. John says that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, the term he uses is more vivid. He actually says that the Word has pitched his Tent among us.

The Acts of the Apostles tells us also that Christ is the stone rejected by the builders that has become the cornerstone of the new and living Temple (cf Acts 4.11). In Acts 15, James speaks of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church as the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Amos:

I will rebuild the Tent of David, which has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will set it up,
that the rest of men may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name (Acts 15.17).

The New Jerusalem, the City of God, the restored Tabernacle, is a *present* reality in our midst. The Book of Revelation says, "Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21.5); St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5.17). What is true of the redeemed believer individually is true in a corporate way of the redeemed community, the Church. Both as individuals and as the Mystical Body of Christ we have a foretaste of eternal life, of the restored Paradise, ever since our Savior's Resurrection.

It remains true that this restoration of all things in Christ comes at a great price: the precious blood of Christ was poured out to make it so. We, as his disciples, can expect to share in his Cross if we would share in his glory: it is indeed "through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14.22). What the enemies and detractors of the Church cannot bear is the implications of the Incarnation, the truth that God the Word was made flesh and still makes his dwelling among us. The powers of this world crucified Christ because they would not allow God to come so close, nor would they have him reign over them.



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The Acts of the Apostles, despite its recognition of persecutions from without and dissensions from within, is still the story of the triumph of Christ in his Church: for the book ends with the storming of Rome itself by the apostolic preaching. For that reason, it is a serious error to see the conversion of Constantine and the development of Christian civilization as some sort of corruption of the gospel: on the contrary, this is the providential unfolding of the temporal aspect of the Lord's living Temple, his Holy City. Whether it looks like a great Temple or more like a tent in serious disrepair, it's still the place where the Lord has chosen to dwell. In his prophetic address at Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI condemned this destructive effort to separate Christian faith from its Greco-Roman heritage. These are his words:

In the light of our experience with cultural pluralism, it is often said nowadays that the synthesis with Hellenism achieved in the early Church was an initial inculturation which ought not to be binding on other cultures. The latter are said to have the right to return to the simple message of the New Testament prior to that inculturation, in order to inculturate it anew in their own particular milieux.

This thesis is not simply false, but it is coarse and lacking in precision. The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek spirit, which had already come to maturity as the Old Testament developed. True, there are elements in the evolution of the early Church which do not have to be integrated into all cultures. Nonetheless, the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself.

Some time ago, I found this confirmed from an unexpected quarter: the writer Arthur Koestler, the one-time communist who became a great enemy of communism (which he bitterly denounced as the "God who failed"). Having been deceived by a false messianism based on rejection of God, Koestler felt a profound sense of desolation at the state of Western civilization and hoped that he would find a new inspiration in Asia. But in the end, he found no solutions there to the ills that beset the West. Koestler came back to Europe with a renewed appreciation for its heritage. He had this to say about the evolution of Western civilization:

The geometry of Euclid, Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *Categories* were not just stuck on to the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount; they were united by a process of cross-fertilization, a spiritual marriage, and as its outcome the Logos became flesh. It provided the link between the poetry of St. John of the Cross and the Jesuit astronomers' search for order and harmony in the universe... Greece collapsed, Alexandria burned, the Roman Empire collapsed, yet the Logos remained incarnate, the continuity was sustained. Roman Law, Latin as the universal language and Christianity as the universal Church, gave the European *persona* its definite physical contours and spiritual profile. Whether we believe in



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Christian dogma or not, the tenets of Judeo-Christian ethics, of Latin *civitas* and Greek conceptual thought, which we imbibed unconsciously, almost at the mother's breast, have become integral elements in our make-up... (*The Lotus and the Robot*, p. 284).

In other words, the Word made Flesh is at the center of our civilization, of our very identity, and is therefore also the key to our destiny. For that reason, we must oppose the kind of caustic criticism that attacks Christian and Western civilization itself. Whether voiced in the name of religious or secular idealism, such criticism does not repair the Lord's Tent but rather tears it down and impedes the entrance of the nations into the Lord's dwelling place.

Now Christ our Savior has said that it is by our charity that all men will know that we are his disciples. Surely, though, this charity must begin in the Lord's own household, in his own Tent, and the Tent must be repaired by true charity. Notice, though, what preceded Jesus' words: Judas departed, with Jesus telling him, "What you are going to do, do quickly" (Jn 13.27). That tells us something fundamental: where love for Christ has died, true charity cannot live. As St. Paul says, "If any one has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed" (1 Cor 16.22), for Christ is the love of God made flesh. Any talk of love that is not Christ-centered is hollow and meaningless since it lacks the living center, which is the Heart of Jesus.