

Homily for 5th Sunday of Easter, Year C

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Acts 14:21-27; Ps 144(145); Rev 21:1-5; Jn 13:31-33,34-35

Theme: Sacrificial Love, the mark of the true disciple of Jesus

Our gospel comes within the discourse at the Last Supper. After telling his disciples that one of them would betray him, he handed a piece of bread to Judas, who immediately went out. Jesus then began to speak to his disciples about his glorification. The Greek term *doxazo* means 'to glorify, praise, honour or magnify.' Jesus is glorified and gives glory to the Father through his passion, death and resurrection. Just as Jesus glorified the Father by offering himself on the cross, the Father glorifies him by raising Jesus from the dead. Jesus offered himself in total obedience to the will of the Father for the salvation of the world. He died on the cross out of pure love for humanity. Hence, he says to the disciples; I give you a new commandment: love one another just as I have loved you. Was Jesus actually giving a new commandment? No! this commandment of love for neighbour was already in the Old Testament Law (cf. Lev 19:18). But as St. Augustine says, 'Not the love with which men love one another, but that of the children of the Most High God, who would be brethren of His only-begotten Son.' The newness of the love Jesus speaks about is revealed in the way Jesus sacrificed Himself on the cross. Jesus wants his disciples and followers to love the way he has loved them by laying down their lives for other human beings. That is the height of love. That is the way that people will distinguish the disciples of Jesus.

True love is sacrificial and the mark of the disciples of Jesus. In the first reading, Paul and Barnabas went back to Antioch. The context is that in chapter 13, they had preached in Antioch. When their preaching made a huge impression on the people, stimulating repentance and following from the Gentiles, the Jews incited the devout women to stir up persecution against Paul and Barnabas. They drove them out of the district (cf. Acts 13:48-50). But they were not deterred from going back to preach in Antioch. Although they had been expelled from the town, they had already founded a Christian community. They went back for the love of that community for three reasons. First, to strengthen the souls of the disciples. Jesus had given the disciples the mandate to love sacrificially and make disciples of all nations. Having made disciples, they cannot leave them in their time of persecution. Hence, Paul and Barnabas returned to strengthen the souls of the disciples. The word *episterizo* also means to establish or cause to be firm. Paul and Barnabas wanted the new disciples to be firmly established in the faith they had received.

Second, Paul and Barnabas encouraged them to continue in the faith they had taught them. And third, to put up with the trials and tribulations which will lead them to enter the kingdom of God. Paul and Barnabas demonstrated by their returning to where they had been persecuted and expelled that they were ready to suffer for the faith and the sake of the newly formed community of disciples. Having encouraged and strengthened the faith of the new community, Paul and Barnabas set up a formidable structure that will outlast them. They are appointed in every *ekklesia*, that is, assembly or church, *presbuteros*, literally elders in Greek, but from where we get presbyters, that is, priests. They committed the appointed elders or leaders to the Lord through prayer and fasting. From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas went to Pisidia and Pamphylia and then to Perga and Attalia, then back to Antioch, their original community. Think about the love and zeal Paul and Barnabas had for the faith and the newly formed Christian communities. They were ready to make sacrifices for the faith and the Christian community.

Those who love sacrificially, just as Jesus gave up his life for his bride, the Church, will share in the wedding feast of the Lamb in the new Jerusalem. So likewise, the members of the Church here on earth must strive daily to enter into the glory of the new Jerusalem, their true homeland. That is where our true citizenship is.