

Homily for April 25, 2010 (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, C)  
*Acts 13:14, 43-52; Ps 100 (vv); Rev 7:9-12; Jn (10:27-30)*

*Shall we circle the wagons or hit the road?*

This is a question that the Church has had to ask itself from the earliest stages of its development in the wake of Christ's death and resurrection. On the one hand, the disciples could not ignore the commission that Jesus had given them to preach, teach, heal and baptize (see Mt 28:16-20, Mk 16:1-20, Luke 24:36-53, John 20:18-23, and Acts 1:1-9). On the other, they had to contend with many who rejected the gospel and the ministry that Jesus gave them. For such people, what the disciples had to share was anything but Good News.

Persecution, controversy and misunderstanding have been with Church from the beginning, right along with the Holy Spirit. The days immediately following the resurrection found the disciples huddled in fear behind locked doors (John 20:19, 26). In the wake of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to the disciples gathered in Jerusalem, some were ready to dismiss their powerful testimonies and speaking in tongues as little more than drunken blathering (Acts 2:1-13).

Then things got serious.

Stephen was stoned to death for his prophetic stand for Christ, and a wave and persecutions and arrests followed—many led by a man named Saul (see Acts 6:8-8:4). Soon after, this same Saul encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus and was radically transformed by the experience (Acts 9:1-19). The nascent Church's greatest foe became its greatest missionary; and many of his former compatriots then wanted to kill him (Acts 9:20-23). Our first reading today features Paul and Barnabas bringing the gospel to the synagogue in Syrian Antioch and getting a decidedly mixed reception.

This fragile but growing community that was so troubled from the outside was also bedeviled by a host of internal problems, including: dishonesty and hypocrisy (Acts 5:1-11); complaints of discrimination (Acts 6:1); attempts to do commerce in spiritual gifts (Acts 8:9-24); disputes over orthodoxy and membership (see Acts 14-15); and a host of sexual and relational sins and dysfunctions (1 Corinthians 5:1-9 and Romans 1:18-27).

That helps to put the Church's current struggles, controversies, persecutions, and sins into greater perspective, doesn't it?

Of course, that doesn't absolve us of dealing with those problems. In this age of the internet and 24/7 global communications, news (especially bad news, it seems) travels fast and can stick around a long time. In recent months, we have all seen more than our share of bad news about the Church. Ironically and tragically,

most of it has been generated by those who were ordained to serve, lead, and proclaim the Good News.

Today's scripture readings, however, give us reason to hope, even in this season of troubles.

Our second reading from the Book of Revelation was written during a time of a widespread and vicious campaign against the Church. It was instigated during the reign of Domitian (c. 81-96 CE) and had the full force of the Roman Empire behind it. Inspired by a vision from the Lord, John wrote to a community under siege by forces bent on destroying it. His primary message could be distilled as, "Hold on, hold out, a change is gonna come!"

He could not promise them comfort and rewards in this life. That was a difficult promise to make when people were being rounded up, tortured, and killed all around them. Instead, John offered them a joyful, peaceful, and consoling vision of life in eternity: if they remained faithful with the holy ones on earth, they would one day join the communion of saints in heaven.

It's a beautiful vision; but it's not enough. The Lord also calls us to also make real here on earth the love, goodness, and peace of his kingdom. He wants us to make real our prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Here on earth, a Church that is so easily frightened, distracted, divided and willful has been promised and given a Shepherd: Jesus Christ. True, we have pastors (the Latin word for shepherds)—priests, bishops, the Pope and other ministers—but all of us, no matter who we are, must ultimately heed the voice of Jesus...and his voice alone; and the only way that we can heed his voice is if we learn to recognize it. We do that by developing an intimacy and familiarity with the Lord through prayer, meditation, contemplation, action and reflection, especially on his word.

- *Prayer*—We offer prayers of thanksgiving, petition and even lament, both individually and communally, acknowledging our need for the Lord and his grace. Prayer is also at the heart of our liturgical life.
- *Meditation*—We still our bodies and the "inner ears" of our hearts and minds and develop a spirit of attentiveness to the Lord.
- *Contemplation*—We rest in the Lord and wait for the Spirit to move us.
- *Action*—We respond to that Spirit and fulfill our vocations.
- *Reflection*—We "check in" with the Lord and each other, to make sure that we are truly responding to his voice and not others'.

If we are true to the Lord's voice, we will soon realize that "circling the wagons" and living as a Church under siege is not really an option—not if we would follow the one who opened his arms on the cross for us. +