May 12, 2019

Fourth Sunday of Easter (C),
Acts 13:14, 43-52; Ps 100:1-3, 5; Rev 7:9, 14b-17; John 10:27-30

By Dianne Bergant, CSA

The readings for this Sunday pose a challenge for our reflection. While all three readings speak of responding positively to the call of God, the passage from Acts tells of some who opposed the message that they heard. This second theme creates a context for interpretation in which some within the stories are seen as open and faithful and others are portrayed as obstinate and faithless. Both passages can certainly be read that way, which might well have been their original intent. It should be noted, however, that both Acts and Revelation arose from and were intended for religious communities that originated as a form of, even a reform of Pharisaic Judaism. In other words, those who heard the message and responded positively and those who were troubled by the word they heard and spurned its message probably belonged to the same religious group.

These readings are troublesome because of the interpretation that has accompanied them down through the centuries. They are read as opposition between Christians and Jews. Even more problematic is the anti-Judaic/anti-Semitic sentiments and violence that have sprung from this opposition. These readings really depict a religious body (Pharisaic Judaism) that was struggling with various interpretations of its religious tradition, not unlike what the church is struggling with today.

Initially, those who accepted the new teaching of ‘the way,’ (the name given to the followers of Jesus) were a minority within the group. As such, they had to explain, even justify their new insights. Their arguments are often found within New Testament writings. Eventually they gained significant political power, which was frequently used against the religious group from which they came. Christianity now carries the shame of such bloody conflict.

But how should we understand these readings, particularly during Easter season? Acts describes internal religious strife. Within the community are those who are open to new religious insights and those who claim fidelity to tradition. This challenges us to look at our own contemporary internal struggles. Does fidelity to the message mean that we should be open to change or should we cling to traditional forms of understanding? Whose interpretation should we follow? The scene from Revelation is painted in multicolored diversity, “from every nation, race, people, and tongue.” There is no insistence here on one way of believing, or understanding, or worshipping, or being faithful. How well do we deal with religious diversity? Finally, both Revelation and the gospel depict Jesus as a shepherd, one totally committed to the
protection and nourishing of the sheep. Are our eyes on this shepherd as portrayed in the gospels? Or do we follow a way more to our own liking?

Placing these readings into the context of the Easter season, we recognize that the struggle of the early followers of Jesus mirrors our own struggle. The message of Easter is loud and clear: ‘Do not be afraid! I am with you.’ What does it mean to be his people? It means that we must know the riches of our faith (tradition) and we must bring those riches to life in our own time and place (change). It means that we must hold fast to his promise to be with us, in each other, and to bring others to this joy of the Holy Spirit.

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