

SERMON KRIJTBERG SATURDAY, MAY 21ST 2022
on Acts 15, 1 – 2 & 22 – 29. and John 14, 23 – 29
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They had a huge problem, my dear friends, those first followers of Jesus of Nazareth. They had a huge problem. The first group of Christians were all of them Jewish people, brought up in the Thora, the law of Moses. All of them were circumcised as a sign of sharing in the covenant between God and his people. They were God's chosen people, a small but special group in a world full of people of different color, different faith, different persuasion. They were special, they felt special. Being special was their identity and being circumcised was their trademark.

And in comes Jesus. He is a Jew like all of them. He was circumcised like all of them. He held on to the law of Moses like all of them. He even lived it like few others, honest and with total dedication. He became an example of how God would have wanted all his people to live. They even recognized Him to be God's Son. And although the leaders of those days rejected and killed Him, crucifying Jesus and doing away with Him in a sealed grave, God raised Him up from the dead to live with Him as their Lord forever. They were doubly special. Special as members of God's chosen people and special as followers of God's Son, Jesus of Nazareth.

All of this was quite straight forward and relatively simple until, obedient to what Jesus had ordered them to do, they started preaching the gospel to the whole world. That is when they ran into their huge problem. There were some members of their group who were of the opinion that the pagans who wanted to become Christians, first had to become Jews before being welcomed into their very special group. These new converts would first have to go through an inculturation course, part of which was 'circumcision', before being able to become an accepted follower of Jesus. Others again called that 'utter nonsense'. Even men of great authority, like Paul and Barnabas, rejected that requirement. Indeed, they had a huge problem.

In Jerusalem they faced that problem. They had long and bitter arguments about this, but at the end, after intense prayer and fasting and carefully listening to each other, the Holy Spirit and the people gathered there decided not to saddle their converts with any burden beyond the essentials of abstaining from partaking in sacrificing to idols.

What a courageous decision that was. What had they done? They had overcome all thinking in terms of right and wrong. They left behind all feelings of being better than the other, every trace of following the party line. The only issue was: What would Jesus have decided? What is best for the people? What is a positive and lifegiving way forward in our situation, in their very important predicament. They believed and were convinced that "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father had sent in Jesus' name, would teach them everything and remind them of all Jesus had told them." And so it happened. They wrote a letter to all the churches and settled the issue once and for all. An issue that that could have ended in bitter conflict and a total break-up of the still young movement of Jesus' followers. But it became a source of great joy!

All those who took part in this synodal process experienced themselves what Jesus had promised them. In a question, that could have ended their bond, they found peace. "Peace, I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give. This is my gift to you." This gift of real peace became the rock where Christianity was built on.

This, my dear friends, is not a story of centuries ago, a bit of history of the early church. This is part of our own life and of the life of our church. Christianity, that once was the common faith of everyone in the Western world, Christianity, that once was the culture of all the nations and people living in the Western hemisphere, is facing a huge problem. The Christian world has become a secularized world. We no longer live one cultural reality; we find ourselves living together with different cultures, featuring different values and displaying very different customs. We experience that values, dear to us, and feasts that ordered our years, are no longer self-evident and to be taken for granted.

One way of dealing with this changed reality is: closing our eyes and ears and carry on doing what we have done before for ages. But that will not bring us anywhere, at the best into a stuffy ghetto. Another way forward is to face the music. That is what Pope Francis is inviting us to do with his synodal process. He invites all members of our church, and even wider, all Christians of good will, to come together and open our eyes to the situation challenging us. How are we going to face the future of our rapidly changing world and environment. We have to pray about that. We are invited to come together and to listen to what each of us has to contribute. Not in a manner of getting my idea accepted, but carefully discerning where the Holy Spirit, through the contribution of all God's children is leading us.

Jesus' promise, that the Holy Spirit, whom the Father sends in Jesus' name will teach us everything that Jesus told his friends during his life, that promise is still valid. The Holy Spirit is hard at work. And the outcome of our discernment will bring peace, a peace the world cannot give, but is given to those who let themselves be guided by God's love. May the example of the apostles, together in Jerusalem to solve their problem, give us the courage and the trust to solve our problems too. Amen.