

De Krijtberg, 13 May 2023, Sixth Sunday of Easter, Acts 8:5-8,14-17,
1 Pet. 3:15-18, John 14:15-21.

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On regular Sundays, the first reading is taken from the Old Testament. But on Easter Sundays this is not the case. Then the first reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. In this book, we are confronted with the earliest history of the church, a vital story of the growth of the first Christian communities. It is the story of the Good News successfully proclaimed: first in Jerusalem, then in Samaria, and finally in Greece and Rome.

This Sunday's three readings

Today's first reading, from Acts, is a success story: the Gospel has already reached Samaria. But the second and third readings are different in tone. They may be more in line with our own experience. Success stories are not everywhere to report these days. Rather the opposite. In many countries the church has lost much of its former relevance. Where it loses ground, it becomes involved in itself, preoccupied with its own survival, and defensive against the outside world.

The second reading, from Peter's letter, seems particularly applicable to the present situation. Peter addresses his fellow believers who are viewed with suspicion by the unbelievers around them. He says to them: always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have. They must bear witness to the hope that lives within them, the hope that sustains them in a hostile world. Their testimony is to be expressed with courtesy and respect. Then those who slander the good behavior of the Christians may be ashamed. Peter is not talking about a fearful or aggressive defense, but of a non-defensive attitude of hope and self-confidence, which has a disarming effect.

A difficult situation is also outlined in the Gospel of John. The atmosphere is one of fear and anxiety. Jesus is going to his doom and death. The disciples do not know how to proceed. But Jesus keeps repeating the same reassuring words: Continue to love me. That is, stay faithful to me, remain faithful to the glad tidings that I have proclaimed. And show that faithfulness by deeds: If you love me you will keep my commandments (v. 15, cf. 21). If you do this, you will notice that God's Spirit will be with you. Jesus, in whom the disciples recognized God's presence, will leave them, but God will be with them in a new way: the Spirit of God will inspire them.

Today's gospel: the disciples of Jesus, the church of John, us

Let me continue on today's gospel reading. This gospel can be read on three levels. First, it is about Jesus and the apostles. But it is also about John's own congregation, a congregation in Asia Minor from around the year 100: that is the second level on which the text can be read. The writer of John's Gospel wanted to encourage his readers in their own situation, a situation similar to the circumstances the apostles found themselves during their last meeting with Jesus. There is another similarity between the apostles and John's congregation: the apostles saw their master depart, but John's congregation had never even seen Jesus. What Jesus says to the apostles also applies to John's hearers. The apostles hear from Jesus the comforting and empowering words: when I go away you will receive a Helper, God's Spirit, who will animate you. These words also apply to John's congregation. Finally, there is a third level: the gospel is our story too. Our situation is similar to that of Jesus'

disciples just before his suffering and to that of the first Christians, a group that has a message the world does not seem to care about. There is a contradiction between a Christian conviction and a world that is not waiting for our message, perhaps not hostile to it, but at least indifferent to it. But the contradiction between belief and disbelief in ourselves is perhaps even more dangerous. The opposition that comes from outside is more bearable than the uncertainty and disbelief within ourselves.

The antidote to unbelief, doubt and fear in ourselves is given to us in Jesus' words: If you love me you will keep my commandments. The Father will give you another Helper to be with you for ever. No fear, but confidence in the gospel as our way of life. Confessing this gospel with your mouth, but above all living it in practice. This will help us. Our fear disappears when we live according to our inspiration. We only come to believe when we put this belief into practice. You only start believing in something when you put effort into it. When we try to live according to the gospel, God's helping Spirit will be with us.