

The Church in Antioch

(Adventures in Acts, session 11)

Thursday, November 29, 2007

Before considering the church as it is founded in Antioch (in what is now Turkey),
transmitted to us in Acts 11:19 (and following),

let us quickly resituate the development of the early church

according to what precedes in the Acts of the Apostles:

- Stephen, the deacon, is martyred in approximately 35 AD (Acts 7:54-60).
- Persecution follows, and the church in Jerusalem is scattered, except the Apostles (Acts 8:11).

Why were the Apostles not scattered? It is perhaps because they were of Jewish origin, and, as “Jewish Christians”, they were less of a threat to the Temple and to the Law.

Their concentration in Jerusalem, of course, proves to be an obvious source of strength to the Church nascent.

- Philip, the next deacon on the list after Stephen (Acts 6:5), begins his preaching (Acts 8:4-8).
- Simon the magician, a prominent figure in Samaria, is converted through Peter (Acts 8:9-25).
- The Ethiopian eunuch is converted through Philip (Acts 8:26-40).
- Saul, the hard and ferocious persecutor, is converted through no intermediary, on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). He needed direct lightning!
- At once Saul begins his preaching right there in Damascus (Acts 9:20-22), then continues in Jerusalem, where he encounters the Apostles (Acts 9:23-30). Interestingly, he returns to the place of his persecution of the Church to bring healing and reparation.

Indeed, when possible, the Holy Spirit often leads us to do the same: to bring healing and reparation there where we once brought pain and division. The Apostles, of course, are understandably initially reluctant to welcome Saul!

- Then there is mention of a period of peace and growth for the early church – one can suppose, in large part, because the chief persecutor had changed sides!
- Peter is mentioned as continuing his ministry: of healing, of resurrection of the dead (not bad!), and preaching conversion. The last is exemplified in the encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10.
- Acts 11:1-18 is the encounter between Peter and the other Apostles (and other brethren) subsequent to his early ministry amongst the Gentiles. The other Apostles are not happy campers! They believe Peter had transgressed their Jewish roots. He is treading and mingling there where he ought not. This “circumcision party” opposes Peter’s ministerial dealings because they have not yet understood the ramifications of the Incarnation.

What are the ramifications of the Incarnation?

All of Creation is touched and saved, and thus considered clean.

Let us explicate briefly.

The Word joins humanity to Himself.

The Word takes flesh to Himself.

And, by association, the Word joins the Cosmos to Himself.

(Indeed, the human body is the crowning piece, the fine flower of the Cosmos,
and is inextricably linked to the Cosmos.)

Consequently, nothing in the Cosmos is unclean in itself.

Some things may be frightening (e.g. snakes) or dangerous for us (e.g. tidal waves),
given the limitations of our body and our psyche, but they are not unclean *per se*.

Certain things become “unclean” by virtue of unloving use by humans,
although they remain clean in themselves (e.g. alcohol).

Nothing natural is immoral in itself.

For example, the so-called “negative” emotions (hatred, anger, etc.) are *a-moral*.

They are morally *neutral*.

They are considered negative only because of what they can lead persons to do.

In taking humanity to Himself, the Son

- joins the entire Cosmos to Himself *and*
- opens the mystery of God to all humanity

Disciples of Christ must be open to the Cosmos and to all of humanity.

The “chosen people” is now all of humanity.

In joining humanity to Himself, and thus opening the mystery of God to all humanity,
the Son fulfills what was prepared and prophesied (cf. Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:25-26).

Now, as we believe, the New Testament sheds light on the Old Testament,

and what was prophesied and promised concerning this

is “explained”, i.e. strongly articulated by those who are of the New Covenant.

Our intense Jewish convert Saul, Paul, speaks much

- of the expansion of Christianity into Gentile territory
- of Christ embracing non-Jews

In other words, he further sheds light on what is being transmitted in Acts.

For example, in Romans 9 to 11, he does so quite profoundly
(and initially quite poignantly).

I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; my conscience joins with the Holy Spirit in bearing me witness, that I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kin according to the flesh.

They are Israelites; theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen. (9:1-5)

Paul, in quoting Moses, then acknowledges that the election then expands:
For he says to Moses: "I will show mercy to whom I will, I will take pity on whom I will." (9:15)

Salvation is not object of inheritance or laborious earning:
What then shall we say? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have achieved it, that is, righteousness that comes from faith; but that Israel, who pursued the law of righteousness, did not attain to that law? Why not? Because they did it not by faith, but as if it could be done by works. They stumbled over the stone that causes stumbling, as it is written: "Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion that will make people stumble and a rock that will make them fall, and whoever believes in him shall not be put to shame." (9:30-33)

The salvation that comes with and in encountering God is a *gratuitous gift*. It is not achieved, but *received* in faith.

In fact, this God so gratuitously gives and is so merciful and creative that he even makes use of hardness of heart to communicate himself to others.

I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers, so that you will not become wise (in) your own estimation: a hardening has come upon Israel in part, until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and thus all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come out of Zion, he will turn away godlessness from Jacob. (11:25-26)

In fact, the gratuitous election expands to the utmost. Paul seems to suggest that any hardness of heart of humanity will become the means by which God saves all....

For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all. (11:32)

Acts 11:19-26 transmits, as mentioned, the founding of the **church on Antioch**. Those who initially went to Antioch are unnamed, although the official foundation of the church in Antioch is attributed to Peter.

The mother-church in Jerusalem, upon hearing the good news of the growth of the church, sent Barnabas. (Barnabas, you may recall, sold a piece of property, and laid the money from the sale at the feet of the Apostles in Acts 4:36-37. He then somehow joined them, and later takes charge of Paul and brings him to the Apostles in Acts 9:27. There is also mention of him in Galatians 2) Here Barnabas again finds Paul and brings him.

Peter later arrived to solidify and officially establish the church (perhaps close to 44 AD). Peter stayed for at least a year.

Peter then appointed the first Bishop of Antioch, Evodius, under whom Antioch began its development as the cradle of early Gentile Christianity.

As a city, Antioch was founded some 300 years before Christ, by one of the princely successors of Alexander the great, Seleucus, who named the city after his father Antiochus. Antioch was a large metropolitan area, with a population of approximately 500,000. It was the third great city in the Roman Empire, after Rome in Italy and Alexandria in Egypt.

The first Bishop of Antioch, Evodius, is sometimes credited with giving the name of “Christians” to his people, the community of those who *belong to Christ*.

It is the *second* Bishop of Antioch who left a particularly indelible mark on the community of Antioch, and the Church as a whole: *Ignatius* (50-117) More than one of the earliest ecclesiastical writers have given credence to the legend that Ignatius was the child whom the Savior took up in His arms, as described in Mark 9:35.

It is also believed, and with greater probability, that, with his friend Polycarp, he was among the auditors of the Apostle John. He is credited with teaching his people to make the sign of the cross with three fingers, to signify the Trinity. And he, of course, suffered martyrdom in Rome. In anticipation of his death, which he considered a glorious privilege, he wrote:

**I am God's wheat, ground finely by the lion's teeth
to be made purest bread for Christ.**

No early pleasures, no kingdoms of this world can benefit me in any way. I prefer death in Christ Jesus to power over the farthest limits of the earth. He who died in place of us is the one object of my quest. He who rose for our sakes is my one desire. The time for my birth is close at hand. Forgive me, my brothers. Do not stand in the way of my birth to real life; do not wish me stillborn. My desire is to belong to God. Do not, then, hand me back to the world. Do not try to tempt me with material things. Let me attain pure light. Only on my arrival there can I be fully a human being. Give me the privilege of imitating the passion of my God.

The church continued to grow, and exhibited something special,
such that it be the first community to be called “Christian”.

Again, Bishop Evodius is credited with the name.

But, given that the hierarchy normally largely engages in the approbation (or rejection) of things that first *emerge in the community*, rather than drop things from the sky, perhaps the name Christian emerged in response to/to describe the loving testimony of the community.

Perhaps, what follows (Acts 11:27-30), reveals this.

- A Christian is known as such truly
- Someone is discerned as belonging to Christ when Christ can be “seen” in the person.

Is not the great testimony of friendship with Christ,
that of *His* love at work in and through us.

John states very clearly that fraternal love
is the eloquent manifestation of our belonging to Christ.

The love which binds us to Christ binds us to one another.

Therefore, our relationship with Christ

must immediately, concretely translate into acts of love for one another.

Indeed, what is the *new* great commandment? “Love one another as I have loved you”.

And so we read in John’s first epistle:

If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him?

Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. (3:17-18)

If anyone says, "I love God," but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (4:20-21)

Perhaps the testimony of overflowing, real, gratuitous fraternal love moved those witnessing it to give the members of the church in Antioch the name of “Christian”.
Indeed, this is what should characterize the community of those who belong to Christ.

Let us pray that we merit the name...

