

During the Easter Season, the Gospel readings focus largely on the Resurrection accounts and the appearances of our Lord after His Resurrection. In addition to that, however, the Church gives us readings from The Acts of the Apostles, both on weekdays and Sundays. The Easter Season is a sensible and reasonable time to hear from The Acts of the Apostles since the Ascension occurs during the Easter Season (40 days after Easter) and the Easter Season concludes with Pentecost (50 days after Easter), which is often called the “birthday” of the Church, insofar as it is the day when the Church is really manifested. In other words, after the Resurrection our Lord is also making final preparations for His Church to now take up the work of building up the Kingdom of God through teaching and sanctifying. Jesus is especially preparing the Apostles to participate in His salvific work after His Resurrection. So it is “logical,” then, that the Church would also “show,” during the Easter Season, the fruit of our Lord’s post-Resurrection labor, and how it began; the Gospels show our Lord’s preparations after the Resurrection, Acts shows it being undertaken after Pentecost.

Last year there was a bulletin article on The Acts of the Apostles that covered, among other things, some general characteristics of this book of Sacred Scripture, this inspired writing. In this article I would like to pick up some of the specific readings from Acts that the Church has given us, especially chapter 4 which relates the persecution that the Apostles suffered at the hands of the Sanhedrin, the governing body of the Jews.

Why did the Sanhedrin go after the Apostles? Scripture tells us – because they were filled with envy. Without even going into any depth on this, it is a good lesson for us. These people persecuted our forefathers out of envy. I see the evil that envy caused here and immediately I am able to say to myself: don’t let such a thing enter into me and control me; it will always cause harm to the saints and servants of God, which does grave harm to my soul and will ultimately separate me from the Lord; if envy presents itself to my mind, I will reject it. I don’t really need to see or know anything further; I see the ugly consequences here and I want nothing to do with envy. At the same time, a fuller understanding of envy could help reject this vice.

Scripture says that sin entered the world through the envy of the devil. The devil hated, was saddened or disturbed we could say, to see man’s relation with God and sought to take it, corrupt it, even destroy it. The Sanhedrin did the same. It is true that they were envious of the Apostles because of the converts they were making but even more to the point, they were envious of God; they wanted that which belonged to God, namely the hearts and minds of His people. We can fall into a similar type of envy. The Apostles were not seeking followers for themselves but for the Lord. If we want to work for the Lord, we have to do the same, keeping the intention pure, fighting against the evil of envy.

While it is possible to have envy of another’s spiritual good – for example, maybe the virtue or special gifts of the saints or others – at the same time, envy is almost always for things of this world and this life; the relationships that others have, their property, the esteem of others, and so on. Envy is almost always a sign that the person is looking at the things of this life and this world way too much and not looking at the things of Heaven. It is a sign that a desire for God has been supplanted by a desire for the things of this world. As such it is a signal to the person, a signal to say: what am I doing? Sorry Lord, let me get first things first.

The envy of the Sanhedrin is what led to this persecution of the Apostles. What started this particular incident was the healing of a lame man in the Temple area. The Apostles had already made thousands of converts and with this healing, done through Peter & John, even more were coming to believe in our Lord through the preaching of the Apostles. Once again notice that our Lord provides proof of His approval of the Apostles, that they were in fact commissioned by Him and doing His will.

In reading The Acts of the Apostles, one thing that might be noticed is that their preaching is quite straightforward, not harsh but not so nuanced that you can’t even tell what they’re saying. On Pentecost, Peter spoke of all the signs that our Lord performed and then told the Jews: this man you killed, using lawless men to crucify Him. Then he speaks of our Lord’s mercy. Three-thousand were baptized. What St Peter, our first Pope, did was call them to repentance and then offer the mercy of God. This is always the way of progression

to our Lord – we enter into repentance including a firm commitment to turn away from our sins and follow the Lord, Jesus grants mercy, there is a big and happy (re)union.

The Apostles spoke in the same forthright manner regardless of who they were talking to. When they were called before the Sanhedrin, Peter spoke boldly of our Lord, that it was He who healed the lame man, and that there is no salvation through anyone else.

It is good for us, especially in our own times, to look back on our fathers in faith, real fathers to see: 1) how they served the Lord, and 2) notice that our Lord provided clear signs of His approval of them (miracles). So many today seem to cower in the face of the truths of the faith. Say nothing that would offend, which entails covering up truths like “there is no salvation through anyone else,” is all too often the rule of the day. This is clearly not what our fathers did, fathers who were clearly approved by the Lord. There is no call for harshness, much less belligerence. But there is a call for straightforward proclamation of the truths of the faith. Nothing less than eternal life vs eternal misery is at stake. Love your neighbor does not mean stand by while he throws himself headlong into hell.

Ah, but what about the consequences for me? I’m afraid that is all too often really the concern – not salvation of souls (serving the Lord selflessly) or even another person’s feelings but rather the consequences for me. So what are those consequences? Peter & John were jailed twice and beaten with rods the second time. Acts tells us that when they came back to the other disciples both times rejoicing and that the other disciples rejoiced with them. Do you find that crazy? I suppose if that’s a person’s initial reaction it might be ok, as long as they’re willing to come back and say: now wait a minute though, these are saints, their work, their life, their mentality is being approved by the Lord. If I’m thinking that this is crazy, there must be something in my own self, my own thinking, that needs adjustment because, after all, this is the inspired word of God. If what happened to my fathers, my saintly friends and brothers (Peter & John, for example), happened to me, would I even keep going, would I persevere? Or would I just get mad or fearful and quit – if that’s the way it’s going to be, then just forget it? What was at their core that compelled them to not only keep going but rejoice at the hardships? It was love of our Lord. The reason they rejoiced when persecuted is not because of some morbid attraction to suffering but because they understood that this was a participation in their Lord’s suffering, that endurance of this suffering was a reciprocation of His love, something that love always wants to do – reciprocate in kind. Then I would have to say to myself, how do I get this love? Well, that is something we talk about often – prayer, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, Mass, Confession, study of the faith, meditation, and so on.

Let’s review. Peter, John, and the other Apostles are preaching straightforwardly, as our Lord intends it. Modern man tends to step back from this, perhaps largely because of the consequences for himself. What are those consequences – jail and beatings is one. But that is not all. Love, man’s ultimate fulfillment, is another. The Apostles considered the price of this love small, which is why they rejoiced.

But that is still not the end of the question: what are the consequences. Here we can begin to see another reason that readings from The Acts of the Apostles are so fitting for the Easter Season. One of the things that the Apostles were preaching was, of course, the Resurrection of Jesus. What are the consequences of: speaking straightforwardly with good will about the truths of the faith, of letting your Yes be Yes and your No be No, of binding ourselves to the Lord and serving Him first and foremost, of reciprocating His love? It will be participation in that new way of being human called the Resurrection. It will be the glory of Heaven. Is it true? Is this a reality we can really look forward to? Our Lord has confirmed it with plenty of signs. Allow yourself to be convinced.

What are the consequences of following the Lord? Is that the only question? Should we not also consider what the consequences are for not following Him, for going along to get along, for bowing down and worshipping the things of this life and this world? Such things mean exclusion from the Kingdom of God, it means eternal misery, it means a wasted life. Thank God for the example of our forefathers and His Church so that now we know the way and can choose to follow it with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength!

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn*