

## Homily for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year B (11/5/18)

On Thursday we celebrated the Solemnity of the Ascension. After Christ rose from the dead, He spent forty days with his disciples, reminding them of all He had taught them and preparing them for His departure. Now He has gone up to heaven, now what? Were they just supposed to work everything out for themselves, or was God still going to lead them?

Obviously, it's the second option. Jesus was not going to leave them like orphans, with no one to look after them. He was going to send them the Holy Spirit, to be with them and to guide them. But they were not going to be like a group of disconnected individuals, living in absolute isolation from each other. Today, when we have phones, the internet, TVs, radios, newspapers, we can look back at previous generations and see things as being rather primitive. We can be mistaken and prejudiced at times. Some years ago, when I visited Wilenhall Lock Museum, the guide first decided to have a bit of fun with the children there and ask them if they could find the phone in the nineteenth century office. They pointed to various different things, but of course, back then, phones hadn't been invented. But the postal system was in some ways better than it is today. We were told that when the postman arrived, the manager could ask the postman just to wait for a few seconds, whilst he read a letter he was waiting for, quickly scribble a reply and give it to the postman. Then his reply could be back in London by the end of the day.

In the same way, in ancient times, and in the times of the Apostles, people did communicate with each other. The Church of the first century faced new challenges, and they had to get everyone together, pray about it and make decisions. They had to ask themselves, "How does this idea fit with what Christ taught us?" And then that decision was binding on everyone. In the Gospel we heard those words, "Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name". If each of the Apostles were to have no contact with each other and just simply think on their own, "What would Jesus do?" or perhaps, "What would Jesus say?" and then act on that, then by the end of the first century there would have been quarrels and disagreements, splits and disunity. Instead, they had to come together as the Church, headed by Peter. Only then would the Spirit keep them one in the truth.

For example, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, we read that some of the converts from Judaism were saying that everyone should keep the Law of Moses and

be circumcised, as a basic requirement of being a Christian. This caused some trouble, as you can imagine, so it says the Apostles and Elders, i.e. bishops, met in Jerusalem to discuss the matter. The conclusion was that these people were wrong and that Christians did not need to be circumcised and keep all the special rules of the Jewish faith, such as avoiding eating “unclean” animals and so on.

Throughout the ages, there have been times when the Pope and bishops of the Church, as well as other invited experts and so on, have gathered to discuss the questions of the day and to resolve certain issues. At the time of the so-called Reformation, there was a gathering of the Pope and bishops for the Council of Trent, not to be confused with the Council of Stoke-on-Trent. The Council of Trent took place in Trento, or Trent, in northern Italy. In more recent times, we had the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, which took place, surprisingly enough, at the Vatican. One of the topics it dealt with was how God reveals Himself to us today. Of course, God is at work in our lives and other people’s lives all the time, but when it comes to what we should believe, that’s already been revealed to us by God. Vatican II said that divine revelation doesn’t mean just the Bible, though. The Bible needs interpreting, and that’s the job of the Church, taking into account also what has been believed by Christians down throughout the ages. The danger is, that if we decide to go it alone on these matters, we end up inventing our own version of who Christ is, what He taught and what His Church is all about. We end up creating an idol. And idols are no good. We need to meet the real, living God, and that means that at times God runs counter to our expectations. He doesn’t do things the way we would have done them. After all, looking at the history of the early Church, would we have wanted St Peter to be crucified upside down and St Paul to be beheaded? Would it not have been better for them to have died of old age, admired and respected, and having converted the majority of the whole world? God’s ways are not our ways. In 1968, many priests thought the Church might be able to soften up her stance on birth control, but it was not to be. Instead, it was a bit like John chapter 6, where Christ revealed Himself as the Bread of Life, and the people walked away.

“Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us.” As we pray for the descent of the Holy Spirit in these days between the Ascension and Pentecost, we pray that we may be attentive to His voice, working through the Church. We ask that we may follow, both when the message is what we would like it to be, and when it is not.