

4th Sunday of Easter, Year C--April 25, 2010**Readings: Acts 13:14, 43-52; Ps 100:1-2, 3, 5; Rev 7:9, 14b-17; Jn 10: 27-30.
Salvation to the ends of the earth**

In today's readings we hear the beginning of the process that made Christianity a world religion, how the church moved from being a small reform movement within Palestinian Judaism to being the world's largest faith community, indeed the largest, most diverse community of any kind on earth. How the church became a global community is certainly worth reflection when much of the news about the church today suggests decline and diminishment, not growth and expansion.

According to our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the start of Christian expansion was caused by conflict. Paul and Barnabas were both Jews who had found the fullness of their Jewish heritage in the teachings of Jesus and the new life awakened in them by his death and resurrection. They shared their new faith with fellow Jews at the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia (present-day Turkey). Some of their fellow Jews accepted their message, but others rejected it and subjected them to violent abuse. These conflicts led the apostles to decide to bring the good news of Jesus's resurrection to non-Jews, the gentiles from the many nations that were part of the Roman Empire of the time. This was the beginning of the first of St. Paul's great missionary journeys that took him back and forth across the Mediterranean to sow seeds of the gospel across the Empire.

The many gentiles who became Christians were a very diverse lot. Today's second reading from the book of Revelation describes them as "a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue." Why would such a mixture of peoples from present-day Turkey, Iraq, Greece, Rome, and elsewhere abandon their own traditions and become followers of Jesus?

One of the central reasons was the attractiveness of the life of the earliest Christians. A bit before today's reading from Acts of the Apostles, these first Christian communities are described as "of one heart and mind," sharing their possessions, with "no needy person among them." Active, effective care for the poor in the midst of the harshness of an uncaring Empire was central to the way the early Christians lived. It drew many to Christian faith, beginning in Palestine and spreading rapidly throughout the Roman Empire.

But we can also ask: what enabled the earliest Christians to share what they had and to live in ways that attracted many others to join them? This question is all the more perplexing because we know that they were very badly treated by the Roman rulers. They were persecuted, jailed, and killed because of their belief. What would attract people to join such a group?

In the book of Revelation from which our second reading is taken, the Roman Empire is seen as the very embodiment of social violence. It is precisely in the context of persecution by this empire that the "great multitude from every

nation, race, people, and tongue” become Christian. Why? Revelation tells us that in the midst of an empire that subjected them to political oppression, religious persecution, and economic exploitation, the early Christians experienced the God revealed in Jesus as radically for them. God “will shelter them, they will not hunger or thirst anymore, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Even more, God promises never to abandon them, always to hold them in the palm of God’s hand. And as the Gospel puts it, no one can take them out of God’s hand. God promises to give them eternal life. What an extraordinary promise.

So I think our readings give us two hints about why Christianity spread so rapidly throughout the Roman Empire and how it could continue to grow today. First, people are powerfully drawn to a community when they see in it the deep mutual care they saw among the first Christians. And second, the first Christians were able to show such support for each other because they knew they were deeply cared for by a loving God. Knowing God’s love for them set them free from concern for themselves to be concerned for each other, even in the face of persecution. We are radically loved by God just as the first Christians were. That should set us free to become the kind community that draws people from every race and nation to share our lives and faith today. Let’s pray now for a deeper experience of God’s love for us, so we can go out and share it with others.