

Sixth Sunday of Easter – The whole church concurred

The Council of Jerusalem

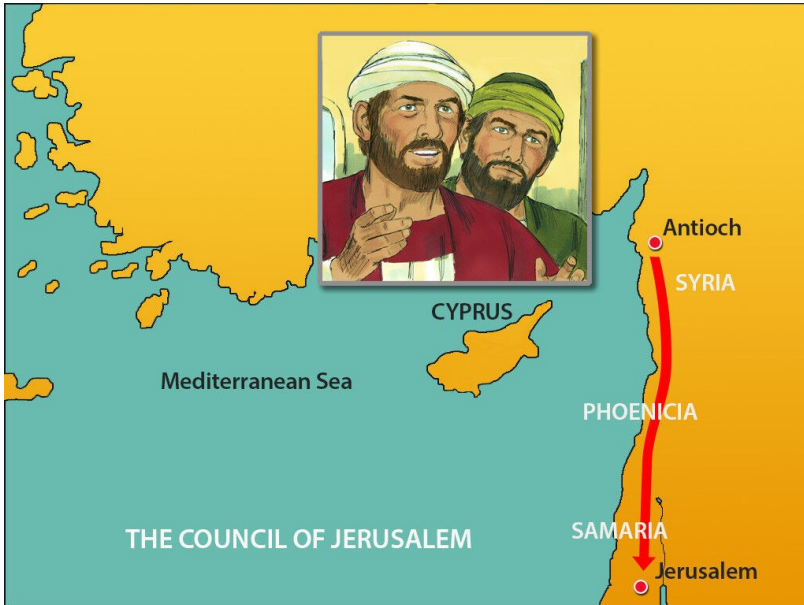


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Introduction

The most frequent way of praying that Saint Ignatius uses is that of imagining ourselves in a Gospel scene. We imagine ourselves as a character in the story. We take part in the story, seeing Jesus and all the other people, being aware of what's going on and how we are feeling. The purpose of praying with the imagination is to allow Christ in the Scripture to speak to us. To bring the Gospel stories to life for us. We are not trying to recreate history. It doesn't matter if your imagination takes the story off in a different direction to the Scripture. It doesn't matter if the story takes place in 1st century Palestine or where we live now in the 21st century. What is important is what God wants to say to us through this passage.

Sit and relax by focussing on your breathing for a few minutes so that you can contemplate the Gospel using our imagination.

Prayer

Acknowledge you are in the presence of God by saying the following prayer:

Direct O Lord and guide and influence all that is happening in my mind and heart during this time of prayer: all my moods and feelings, my memories and imaginings; my hopes and desires; may all be directed and influenced to your greater glory, praise and service and to my growth in your Spirit. Amen

Let the Spirit guide our hearts and enlighten our minds to the awareness of what we can achieve when we allow God to work in us and among us.

Reading Acts 15:1-2.22-29.

Some men came down from Judaea and taught the brothers, "Unless you have yourselves circumcised in the tradition of Moses you cannot be saved." This led to disagreement, and after Paul and Barnabas had had a long argument with these men it was arranged that Paul and Barnabas and others of the church should go up to Jerusalem and discuss the problem with the apostles and elders.

Then the apostles and elders decided to choose delegates to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; the whole church concurred with this. They chose Judas known as Barsabbas and Silas, both leading men in the brotherhood, and gave them this letter to take with them.

"The apostles and elders, your brothers, send greetings to the brothers of pagan birth in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. We hear that some of our members have disturbed you with their demands and have unsettled your minds. They acted without any authority from us, and so we have decided unanimously to elect delegates and to send them to you with Barnabas and Paul, men we highly respect who have dedicated their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accordingly we are sending you Judas and Silas, who will confirm by word of mouth what we have written in this letter.

It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and by ourselves not to saddle you with any burden beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from fornication. Avoid these, and you will do what is right.

Farewell."

Contemplation

In the first reading of the sixth Sunday of Easter, we see conflict beginning to arise in the early church communities. Let us enter the scene and watch how this conflict is resolved by the help of the Holy Spirit.

- Who are you in this scene? Paul? Barnabas? Silas? Barsabbas? One of the men who came down from Judaea? One of the Apostles or elders? Are you a Jew who has converted to Christianity? A Gentile who has converted to Christianity? Are you someone journeying with the apostles?
- If you are a Jewish disciple, how do you feel about non-Jewish disciples not adhering to the Law of Moses by not being circumcised since as far as they were concerned it was an important mark identifying them as one of God's people? Are you scandalised at this? Are you one of those who feel that the Gentile converts should adhere to the same laws as Jewish converts? Or do you think it doesn't matter because the law is so old and circumcision does not affect one's faith in God? Do you just feel happy that Gentiles are converting in great numbers and that the Good News is for everyone?
- If you are Paul or Barnabas, are you annoyed with these men from Judaea imposing their beliefs on the Gentile converts? Do you think they are interfering? Or do you think that this issue was going to arise sooner or later and needs to be addressed? Do you feel that the decision could not be taken by you alone and that is why you went with the details of the conflict to the apostles and elders? Do you see that there needs to be a balance between the feelings of the Jewish converts and Gentiles?
- If you are one of the Gentile converts, how do you feel about these Judaeans wanting you to be circumcised? Do you cringe at the thought? Do you regard the practice as a type of mutilation and don't see the point of it? Or do you try to understand the Jews point of view?
- What is the atmosphere like as the apostles and elders discuss the issue? Are the arguments heated or are they conducted civilly, with respect and sensitivity? Can you see the work of the Holy Spirit as they came to a conclusion? Are you surprised that the decision is unanimous?

- How do you feel when the church leaders make it clear that this is not their decision alone but that of the Holy Spirit? Do you remember Jesus' words to Peter, "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven"? Does this make you confident with the decision that the gentiles should not be burdened by the Jewish law of circumcision? Can you see that what the Gentiles are being asked to do i.e. abstaining from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from fornication are not practices for Jews alone but for anyone who lives by the Word of God?
- Does this conflict make you think about the real meaning of your faith in these ever changing times? Can you see the Holy Spirit at work in your life and that of the life of the church? Can you see that this process of walking together in mutual respect and understanding is powerful?

Speak to the Risen Christ about the conflicts that arise in your faith journey and ask for the grace that like the Jews and Gentiles you too can walk together with others in respect and love.

End Prayer Suscipe of St. Ignatius of Loyola

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty,
my memory, my understanding,
and my entire will,
All I have and call my own.
You have given all to me.
To you, Lord, I return it.
Everything is yours; do with it what you will.
Give me only your love and your grace,
that is enough for me.