

26 May 2025

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

“Return to Antioch and the first controversy”

Acts 14:20b-28

On the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. Then they passed through Pisid'ia, and came to Pamphylia. And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia; and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. And when they arrived, they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Wherever the apostles went, many people embraced the faith and the nascent church grew in the grace of the Lord. Barnabas and Paul not only went to new places, but also returned to those cities where they had already preached, in order to strengthen the new converts in the faith. The apostles did not omit to tell the believers that they would encounter adversity on the way of following Christ: *‘through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God’*.

For us who serve the Lord today, these words remind us that we are engaged in combat. Paul and Barnabas experienced it firsthand during their missionary journey. But to this day, those who would truly serve the Gospel must be willing to accept suffering and hardship for the sake of the truth. That does not mean that we should look for crosses (although there may be certain souls with a special calling to do so), but neither can we avoid them if the Lord puts them in our way.

Today's passage highlights the fact that the apostles appointed priests by prayer and fasting. Unfortunately, the latter practice has largely disappeared from the life of our

Catholic Church. For many centuries, physical fasting was practised as an ascetic exercise, and it is only in recent decades that it has become less and less common. Jesus Himself points out that certain kinds of demons can only be cast out by fasting and prayer (Mk 9:29). Fasting, when practised with the right attitude, is a means to strengthen us spiritually, to implore the Lord's grace and to offer Him a sacrifice.

When the apostles returned to Antioch and told the church how fruitful their missionary journey had been, all rejoiced that the Lord had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles'. However, a major controversy arose in the early church. Let us listen to the account in the Acts of the Apostles:

"But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."

This question would be decisive for the whole subsequent mission. Ultimately, the question was whether the Lord had granted the Gentiles 'direct access' to salvation or whether they first had to be circumcised according to the Law of Moses, as the representatives of the Pharisees who had believed in Christ demanded. After a heated discussion, Peter then took the word and said:

"Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." (Acts 15:7-11)

As we can see, Peter's words carried weight. Added to this was Paul and Barnabas' account of the work that God had begun among the Gentiles, so that the issue was decided. It was James who pronounced the final decision, having found that Peter's words were in line with the prophets:

“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood.” (Acts 15:19-20).

Thanks to this enlightened resolution, the mission among the Gentiles was not hindered and was able to continue its course.

Meditation on the day's Gospel: <https://en.elijamission.net/the-efficacy-of-the-holy-spirit/>