



The Book of Acts tells the story of one of the first controversies to arise in the Church's life and of how it was resolved. On the face of it, it seems quite mild. What was the fuss all about? Why should it matter that some people from Judeae should start teaching the brothers that circumcision in the tradition of Moses was necessary as an entry point into the Christian faith. Why was it so sternly resisted at the time by the likes of Paul and Barnabas, along with all the others? Although it might seem that vital, a very important principle was at stake. As Paul would later say in his letter to the Romans and in his very fierce epistle to the Galatians, it would do violence to the profound truth that we are saved by grace: in which Jesus Christ reaches out to us and, through his death and resurrection, into which we are baptised, makes us adopted children of God. In this way, the barrier between Jew and Gentile is torn down, and there is no need for any circumcision, except that of the heart; and that comes through Baptism. The Holy Spirit leads the Church through this, at times, bitter dispute, and enables the work of the Gospel to be continued and the Kingdom of Heaven proclaimed.

It is this same Spirit which inspires the writer of the Book of Revelation. The Book of Revelation talks about the reality of heaven. And nothing there fits with the way we understand things in our cities and towns and communities. In the Heavenly City, there is no temple. There's no church building. There's no sun, no moon. There's no shutting the city gates in the daytime; gates are for protection from enemies, and open gates symbolize perfect safety. So the gates are open all day, and there is no night; people can come in anytime and bring into the city of God all the glory and honour of all the nations of the world. The only things kept out are those that bring about destruction and death - because this city is for those whose names written into the Lamb's Book of Life. These are all the ones who have been redeemed for God. They will enjoy Christ's companionship on earth and be acknowledged before God in the City of Heaven.

Flowing down the middle of all this is a river -- the channel of God's blessing. There are 12 trees on either side, bearing fruit 12 months a year, and bearing leaves used to heal the nations. This is the same river that is described in the Book of Ezekiel, chapter 47: "Wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live, it will become fresh, and everything will live where the river goes. On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fall, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water from them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing." In Jewish mystical tradition, the number 12 is the number of completion. In the Heavenly City, all things are had in their fullness, in their most complete state. There is nothing lacking. There is nothing missing. Everything is in a state of perfection. Of completion. All is well.

This is a vision of a perfect world, and we, too, strive for this perfection. But we live in the here and now. We are not perfect people, and we do not live in a perfect world. We live in a world of hung parliaments. We live in a divided church. We live in a world of riches and poverty. A world of sickness and health. Of war and peace. A world which contains all the beauty of good and the terror of evil, by God's design. In the world in which we live and move and have being, good and evil grow up together; we must choose between them, and we do not have forever to make up our minds. In the fullness of God's time, evil is always separated from good. Evil is destroyed, good has the victory -- and that's the good news of the Gospel.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us to keep his word if we love him. He assures us that the Holy Spirit will be present to teach and guide us in pathways of peace. And he warns us of the presence of evil in our midst while we await his return: "So I give you my peace, not as the world gives, because the ruler of this world is the Evil One. Don't be troubled or afraid, because I told you that I am going on, and I am coming back. If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going on to be with God, because God is greater than I. And I am telling you this before it happens, so that when it happens, you will believe."

The Gospel of John, and the Book of Revelation, tell us all to hold firm, to stand steadfast, to hold firm, whether it is against fightings within, such as those which threatened to split the Church in the Acts of the Apostles, or persecutions without, such as those whom the writer of Revelation was addressing.

We modern day Christians face fightings within: there are profound disagreements in our Church today, some which threaten to split the Church; we have no idea how they

will be resolved, or how the future will look. There our persecutions without, with many people deeply hostile to the Church and who would dearly love to see it pushed to the margins.

In the face of such challenges we hold firm; we believe. Our Lord is the rock to which we cling. Our Lord is the one who wakes and calms the storm. Our Lord is the one who calls us over the tumult. He is the pillar of cloud by day and of flame by night. Believe in him, trust in him, hope in him and follow him and his Spirit will guide us into all truth and unity and peace.