

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Year C, 2025

Acts 14:21-27
Ps 145

Rev 21:1-5a
Jn 13:31-35

Hardships and charcoal

In our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear Paul and Barnabas exhort the new Christian disciples “to persevere in the faith” despite the opposition and rejection they are encountering. The Apostle explains: “It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” Hardships are necessary.

The hardships that Christians face nowadays vary from place to place. Where do you think it’s easier to be a Christian, in Peru or in Pakistan? In Canada or in Syria? I use these examples deliberately. Canada and Peru are surely much more hospitable to Christianity, and yet there were Christians in what are now Pakistan and Syria centuries before – a millennium and a half before – there were ever Christians in North or South America. Christians in Pakistan and Syria are constantly discriminated against and are regularly subject to *active* persecution – meaning harassment, unjust legal sanctions, loss of property, imprisonment, and even death. On the other hand, Christians in Canada and Peru “suffer” the loss of prestige and privilege as their surrounding cultures grow more secular. But there is no risk of real and active persecution.

That same situation prevails here in the United States. And while our hardships are as nothing compared to those of our fellow Christians in places like Pakistan and Syria, still we have to

contend with hardships of our own. We have “first-world problems.” The prestige, position, and privilege once enjoyed by Christians in the United States is waning, and this decline is becoming more pronounced as our country becomes culturally more secular. And to our shame, much of this is due to our very apparent failure to love one another as Jesus has commanded us: “This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Collectively – clergy and people – we have failed very publicly and visibly to live as true and faithful disciples. Our sins, our bickering and in-fighting, our growing materialistic consumerism, our failure to serve the poor and to advocate for societal reforms that would benefit them and make a more just society – all this is symptomatic of a hardening of our hearts and amounts to a willful violation of Jesus’s commandment to love one another, and to love one another as he has loved us.

Collectively, we have ruined our own reputation, that of the Church, which is meant to be holy. We have faltered in our vocation and in our duty to holiness of life, a holiness that is meant to be visible, a public witness to a life redeemed by the grace of Christ Jesus. And this failure has become a stain – an ugly, black stain – on the Church, making her a target for mockery, contempt, and scorn. This is the reality of things, and it is a hardship that we must undergo, a hardship we must bear if we are to enter the

kingdom of God. And this hardship is all the harder to bear because we have, to a good degree, brought it on ourselves.

What we experience collectively we also experience individually and personally. At some point, if we live long enough, we will look back over the decades of our lives and realize that we have been far from perfect. So many regrets, about poor choices, missed opportunities, missteps and mistakes, times when we went too far and when we did not go far enough, so many things we would do over or never do in the first place, “what I have done, and what I have failed to do” (*Everything Ablaze*, 24). These failures, for which we repent, over which we hold a deep and lasting sorrow, are, again, a stain – an ugly, black stain – that we bear in our bodies, in our minds, on our hearts, and on our souls. And this, too, is a hardship, and a heavy one to bear.

I imagine these – all our collective failings, my own personal sins – as a great lump of charcoal. Not those neat little briquets, but rough and crude lump charcoal: flaky and brittle, dry and crumbly, staining everything it touches, something you want to handle as little as possible. And yet handle it, I must. It is part of me, a part of me that I am ashamed of, that I repudiate. I don’t want to look at it or even admit that it exists, yet I have incontrovertible evidence of it all the time. I see the dark smudges and stains that it leaves behind on everything and everyone I touch or handle or encounter. And after a while, I can start to feel that all I am is charcoal and that the charcoal stains of my sins and failures have

ruined the possibility of holiness for me, blotted out the image of Jesus in me, made it impossible for me know God's grace and to live in his truth. I can come to conclude that I am a charcoal man, with a charcoal heart ... fit only for the fire.

The reason why some people will reject Christ and the Christian way is that, deep within, they feel like this, though maybe they wouldn't articulate it in such a way, or maybe it is too painful for them to admit that this comes pretty close to describing the emotional and spiritual anguish they experience, a result of their own waywardness and sinfulness. Feeling as if you are beyond mercy, beyond forgiveness, this is a terrible kind of suffering. When you are afraid that you will be rejected by God, that fear will keep you away from God, from asking for his mercy. It will make you despair and just give up. Or it may lead you to turn on God and go on the attack against him, to deny that he exists or that he matters.

And yet, nothing, nothing in my "charcoal life" disqualifies me from God's love. In fact, because I am covered in charcoal, because I have become, in so many aspects of my life, a charcoal man, this is exactly what draws God to me. No matter how damaged, or dissolute, or charcoal-dirty is my past (or even my present), none of it can cancel out God's love for me. On the contrary, my miserable state draws him to me, who alone has the power and the will to make of me something new.

This is something of symbolism behind the vision of the Apostle John in our second reading, from the book of Revelation. He saw a new heaven and a new earth coming to replace the former heaven and earth. A holy city from heaven, full of light and glory, replaced the old city of earth, covered in darkness and sin. It was glorious to behold, as God dwelled with the human race to make of them his people, to be for them their God. Every tear wiped away, no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, the old order, burnt charcoal, is gone. "Behold," said the One who sat on the throne, "I make all things new." *I make all things new.*

Do you know what charcoal is, chemically? It's carbon, like ninety percent carbon. Do you know what else is nearly one hundred percent carbon, pure carbon? Diamonds. It's all the same stuff. A diamond is nothing but charcoal rearranged, refashioned, made new.

Behold, I make all things new. In Jesus, God takes the charcoal of our lives into his hands, and by the purifying fire of his holiness, he makes us new, we become like diamonds. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2). To be like Jesus, without sin, without blemish... love, holy and true.

What was charcoal, which stains and sullies, and which no one wants to handle, becomes a diamond, which is pure and clear and

clean and desired by all for its beauty and worth. It's the same stuff, chemically, just renewed, transformed. *Behold, I make all things new.* It's the same me, but now all my regrets and missteps and mistakes no longer burden me or make me ashamed or afraid. The charcoal of my life has not repelled God from me. It has drawn God to me. And behold, he has made me new. Once a lump of charcoal, now I am, by God's mercy and grace, a diamond. And my heart is filled with thanks.

And the truth is, I was always loved by God, who had pity on me, because he loved me and saw in me what I could not see in myself, who did for me what I could not do for myself, who brought about what I could not even imagine possible for myself: that a lump of charcoal could become a diamond.

Behold, he makes all things new.