

**Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year A**  
**(Apr. 24, 2005)**

**Problem Solved**

A few weeks ago our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles pictured an ideal community: those first Christians who came together, lived together, took their meals in common, prayed together, pooled their resources, and saw to it that no one was in want. It was a beautiful picture and we can only be awestruck and full of admiration at a people who could live so peacefully, so harmoniously, and with so much concern for one another. But, after all, that is the Christian way, isn't it?

Well, here we are now in today's first reading from Acts, just a couple of chapters later and we seem to have a very different situation. In fact there is scandal, scandal in the earliest days of the Church. It's a scandal of favoritism, of discrimination. So right from the beginning, it seems the Church was beset by problems. But as we heard they found a good way of solving the problem to everyone's satisfaction.

What happened?

It seems as though there were many widows in Jerusalem at this time, widows who could not help themselves. They were poor. So they looked around for support. And they found it in this new Christian community that had as one of its chief activities taking care of the poor. It was a community interested in everyone, a community that believed we all have the same origin, the same God and Father of all, who had sent his only Son for our salvation, so great was his love for us.

It seems as though the community had started something like a food distribution center or possibly a soup kitchen, and every day the widows came to get their portion. Now at first everything went well. There were no problems and everyone was taken care of. But gradually things began to change. There was an influx into Jerusalem of foreign widows, Jewish women who had lived outside of Israel for most if not all of their lives and who had never learned to speak the language of the country. There were immigrants and what's more, their language was Greek instead of Hebrew or Aramaic. So perhaps the apostles or whoever was tending the soup

kitchen could not understand them when they spoke and did not take care of their need properly. That's where the discrimination came in. They took care of their own, those they could understand, the widows of Jerusalem, but neglected the foreign-born widows. Well it soon became a cause of great scandal in the Christian community, as well it might. For the apostles even to appear to play favorites was hardly proper. And to their credit as soon as they realized what was going on they set about straightening out the situation. First they gathered the community to discuss the situation. It was sort of like a Parish Council meeting in which the whole parish takes part and helps to resolve the problem. The apostles said their own work had become too burdensome for them to assume the responsibility of running the soup kitchen and they needed someone to help. So they appointed seven men, all of them Greek-speaking, who could understand the needs of these poor widows and make sure they were taken care of. We'd generally think of them as the first deacons in the church although they are not specifically called that. Their task was to be impartial in the way they dealt with all.

Perhaps we can begin to understand why this particular story is read to us during Easter time. Over there in Jerusalem they had been caught in that very old and yet very contemporary trap of dividing humanity according to color, race, and tribe. It's a division that always leads to discrimination as we have seen so often in our country in racism that still exists and in attitudes toward immigrants who like those widows come to us poor, needy, and unable to speak our language. Often, too, it leads to war, death, and terrorism as we have seen most recently in Africa and Iraq.

But those early Christians came out of it. They came out of it by remembering how Jesus had said that we are all brothers and sisters and that we should love one another as he loved us, recognizing him in even the least of those among us. That's what they did. And if we are going to be Easter people, people of the resurrection, people of life, not death, people who accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, then that is what we must do as well. And with the grace of God and the good will of all of us, we will. Then the Resurrection of Jesus will be a reality for all of us. Then we will be able to say with the firmest of convictions, "The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed."