

6th Sunday of Easter (A)
(Acts 8:5-8.14-17 / John 14:15-21)
21.05.2017
United in... love

We are not living in 1st century Palestine. However when we look at the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we can discern, as if looking into a mirror, some eternal features of the Church. In the Acts of the Apostles some distinctive traits that our 21st century Christian communities should be showing to the world are drawn to our attention.

One feature which is essential to our Christian identity is mentioned in our first reading today. We are told that “the people united in welcoming the message Philip preached”. This unity of listening and intent is not fortuitous, it is a constitutive element of the definition of what the Church is, or what it should be. This group of disciples united in welcoming the Word of God is the model of a Church which is authentically Christian.

In accepting the Word of God, the people of Samaria did not receive a book. At that time, the New Testament had not yet been written or collected. The expression “Word of God” here encompasses all that was preached by the apostles, all that was inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Are we all united in our desire to listen to and to discern the word of God in our lives, in the lives of our world and of our communities? Are we eager to read the signs of the times together and to interpret them as members of the one Body of Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

The unity of the people in welcoming the Word of God does not mean uniformity. We cannot suppose that the people of Samaria looked like a North Korean army parading in front of the cameras, all walking in the same manner and at the same pace.

We know that the population of Samaria was a mixture of many different races. In the first century, the Samaritans were considered to be heretics and ritually impure.

We can imagine that the first Christians formed a very diverse community, with men and women from different cultural backgrounds. The unity mentioned by the author of the Acts was not about superficial and trivial matters, the people were united in their deepest longing for life, and this is why, once they have welcomed the Word of God, we are told that “there was a great rejoicing in the town”.

However we must be careful. The fact that we are united in listening to somebody does not imply that what we are doing is right or just. In the past, we have seen people uniting in making wrong decisions or in committing horrendous acts. What happened last year in the United States with Donald Trump and in the United Kingdom with Brexit shows us that crowds can be easily manipulated. As Christians we have to remember that some churches were united in their support of Hitler in Germany, of the Apartheid in South Africa, or of military regime in Latin America.

In fact before listening to Philip, the people of Samaria were under the influence of Simon the magician. The author of the Acts of the Apostles informs us that “all of them, from the least to the greatest, listened to Simon eagerly” (8:10).

Unfortunately the truth is that we can be united for or against something or someone for the wrong reasons, out of fear, envy, bigotry and insecurity, out of a desire for revenge or thirst for power.

At the beginning I said that unity in listening to the Word of God is a constitutive sign of the Church. Yet now I would have to add that while this sign is necessary it is not enough.

Our common listening to the Word of God, our times of worship, our best crafted theological discourses can produce self-righteousness and pride and enclose us in spiritual ghettos.

What makes our unity a sure sign of being the Church? What makes us more than a political party? What makes us members of one another in the one Body of Christ?

In the third century, Tertullian notes the amazement of the pagans of his day as they observe the Christian community: “See”, the pagans say, “how they love one another (...) and how they are ready to die for one another” (*Apologeticum*, 39, 7). It is love, when it is forgiving, faithful and generous that makes our unity an authentic Christian unity.

The Church is supposed to be an image of Trinitarian love (cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus...*, n. 28b), an icon of the communion of love between the three Persons of the Trinity.

Our unity is fruitful when it reflects God’s unconditional love. Our families and communities accomplish their Christian mission when they bear witness to the love they have received from God, the love which is at the source of their very existence. We are Church when, among ourselves, we patiently learn to serve one another in love, when, as St Benedict puts it, “our hearts overflow with the inexpressible delight of love” (RB Prol. 49).

Our communion is “rooted and grounded in love” (Ep 3:17). The Church is a school of love wherever we grow in genuine and life-giving love of God, of others and of ourselves. It is a school where we are called to “outdo one another in showing honour” (Rm 12:10).

From this school of love, we are sent into the world to share and deepen the love we have received. As Churches, we strive for unity not in order to be more numerous or more powerful than others but in order to be a more loving people, so that all our brothers and sisters may come know God’s love for them.

Just like the world, our Christian Churches and our families are marked by divisions and suspicion, by discrimination and violence, so let us pray more ardently for the Spirit of unity and love.

May the Spirit of love guide us in love and lead us to Love.