

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Numbers 11:25-29 / Mark 9:38-43, 47-48)
30.09.2018

The Sacred Scriptures affirm that *the Spirit will be poured forth upon all flesh*. (We hear this clear promise made first through the prophet Joel taken up in the Acts of the Apostles; we also have allusions to it in the writings of Isaiah.) In speaking this way, the word of God invites us to recognise God's presence at work in every person we encounter in life. I wonder if we are really ready to do that. Sometimes we are more inclined to be suspicious of others and to question whether God is in them, than we are to recognise and rejoice in the Lord's action in and through them.

Would we not all have to admit that at times we resemble Joshua son of Nun (the young man, assistant to Moses) as he appears in today's first reading, or again John and the other disciples whom we encounter in today's gospel passage? Like them, we question what others are doing in the Lord's name. We may even dare to claim that it is not with the Lord's authority that these people speak and act and so should be stopped. When this is our attitude in regard to others the danger for us is to fail to welcome true manifestations of God's Holy Spirit in our world and thereby to deprive ourselves, and many others, of the graces the Lord wants to offer us through men and women whom He has called and chosen to be agents of His blessing. On some occasions we can even find ourselves overtly opposing the Lord's good work in people who are, in fact, a source of blessing.

By definition *the Spirit is life*. One little line – one of the few I retained from schoolboy science studies – is that a basic sign of life is movement. This leads me to say that life is in incessant movement. We cannot take hold of it and stop it moving. If we do, we put life to death.

The Spirit of God, the Spirit of life, is forever moving and, in so doing, is forever escaping us. A well-known Scripture verse comes to mind: *The wind blows wherever it wishes. You cannot tell where it come from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit*. Despite our incessant efforts to control and restrict the work of God's Spirit in people's lives, we are doomed to failure if we try to oppose the accomplishment of God's purpose. We simply cannot hinder God's Holy Spirit, nor should we try to do so. It is a matter not only of respecting other people's freedom, but also of respecting the sovereign liberty of our God who chooses to act as He pleases, in and through whomsoever He may call to accomplish His great life-giving work in our world.

The Spirit of God is everywhere present, animating every living being by its breath of life. The Spirit engenders life over and beyond our frontiers and our boundaries; over and beyond the confines of our own particular ecclesial communion; over and beyond our own little grouping within the social order and the wider Christian family.

The Spirit of God is at work in those who are not *one of ours*. Those of us who are from this land know how frequently that term *one of ours* has been used to ill-effect, dividing society and holding the Churches far apart from each other. We know how it has fuelled suspicion and led to people who are different to us – politically and religiously – being written off in a scandalous and, ultimately, self-impoverishing manner. What a shame when the term *not one of ours* is used to hold oneself at a distance from fellow Christians within the Church Universal – people who are of another denomination than our own – and also increasingly, in this day and age, to hold people within one denomination apart from others within the same Church because they might be thought of as of a different *tendency*. Unfortunately, people within particular Churches are more and more giving way to sectarian attitudes within their own ecclesial communion. This is happening today among members of a same denomination

as much as it did in the past in regard to Christian brothers and sisters from across the denominational divide.

An even wider consideration merits our attention. It is the fact that the Spirit of the Living God is also at work over and beyond the confines of Christianity. The Spirit can be and is frequently manifested through the intermediary of men and women who are not Christian.

The Spirit is everywhere present and at work in all people. This is what the Church herself proclaims in her prayer and, in a certain sense, albeit often rather timidly, this has always been believed and proclaimed to be true. (*Lex orandi. Lex credendi.*)

So, all in all, there is a call addressed to us through what we hear in and through the Sacred Scriptures this morning; it is to leave behind our narrowness. Put more positively, we could say, what we hear through the Bible readings this morning is a call to widen our horizons.

No one person or group has a monopoly on the Spirit of God. Not only are they foolish, but they are in error who think their group has the monopoly on the Spirit of God. Those who would dare to claim they have the monopoly manifest themselves to be idolaters – self-idolaters! They have created a little god not only for themselves, but also of themselves. My long deceased New Testament teacher, Canon Eric Elliott, used to say to those who held narrow views in class – views which excluded others: *Be careful. Your God is too small.*

I often think that the real issue is that we take ourselves to be God and because we are so small the God we project to the world appears somewhat mean.

While it is fair enough and perfectly understandable that each one is situated within a particular tradition and that he or she feels that they find therein the fullness of truth they are seeking, this does not mean that valuable elements of the truth are not to be found elsewhere. Not only may certain elements of the truth be found elsewhere, they may even be better appreciated and more adequately made manifest in the other places. This statement does not stand in contradiction with the Roman Catholic claim that *the fullness of truth subsists in the Catholic Church*. I find a comment of Bishop Robert Barron (the great and very well-known Roman Catholic American evangelist-teaching bishop) most enlightening in this respect. He recounts how his mentor Francis Cardinal George of Chicago once commented, apropos of ecumenical dialogue: *Though (I believe) the Catholic Church has all the gifts that Christ wanted His people to have, this doesn't mean that other Christian communities don't exercise particular gifts better than we do!* It can be said that *the fullness of truth subsists in the Catholic Church*, while recognising that particular gifts of the Spirit can be, and sometimes are, made more clearly manifest in and through Christian bodies other than the Catholic Church.

We should not be afraid of the freedom of the Holy Spirit to show itself at work when and where and how God wills. The vitality of the Spirit can and will sometimes disturb and surprise us. That is no bad thing. It can serve to shake us out of our complacency and free us from our self-sufficiency.

One thing we must remember when it comes to the manifestations of the Spirit is that they are revealed in diverse manners. Diversity is a hallmark of the gifts of the Spirit at work in people's lives. Paul could not be any clearer than he is on this. We read in 1 Corinthians: *There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit gives them all.*

The Spirit acts diversely/differently in and through a variety of people. That can pose a problem to some folk. Some people perceive certain diversities as total contradictions when, in fact, they are not substantially so. It is not because one thing or one way is different to

another that it is necessarily in contradiction with it. Two different roads can lead to the same destination. Difference need not be interpreted as opposition. And yet, very sadly – sometimes with drastic consequences – this is often how difference has been and still is interpreted: as diametrical opposition!

Behind our sectarian attitudes (which are often just affective/sentimental reactions) and behind our mutual exclusions, more often than not what is hidden is a profound insecurity and even a certain inferiority complex. We can over-compensate with attitudes of superiority when, in fact, what is animating us (albeit unconsciously) is a deep sense of insecurity and inferiority.

There is a danger that the life of the Spirit which we evidence to be at work in other people's lives be considered by us as a judgement upon the quality of our own way of life. This can lead us to react against those who are living God's grace in the way we see they are doing. Let me repeat that we need to be extremely vigilant when it comes to the rejection of the action of the Holy Spirit in other people's lives, for we run the risk of depriving ourselves of what they have to share with us; we can impoverish ourselves greatly in this way.

To live diversity in mutual respect is never easy, but it is always possible.

Of course, it also happens that certain ways are simply incompatible, irreconcilable. In these cases there is a choice to be made in these cases. This choice can lead to separation between the parties engaged on pursuing their respective paths. Discernment is required here. Separation should never be taken lightly. *The Spirits must be tested. The Spirits must be tried to see whether or not they come from God.* This is a Scriptural injunction. That being said, we need to be careful around the criteria of our discernments. We must be honest with ourselves when it comes to our assessments of things that we are uncomfortable with. Is it that we are shying away from the action of God's Spirit which will inevitably sometimes disturb us? We have to be humble and honest enough to admit that sometimes the criteria which come into play in our lives are not true discernment tools at all. We can be driven by jealousies, fears, unfounded suspicions, rooted in deeply-ingrained prejudice etc. Our vision of others and of situations can sometimes be distorted by many *a priori*. We can judge others and situations negatively because of our own inner darkness. Jesus tells us that we can imagine we see clearly specks in other people's eyes while ignoring that there are planks in our own. We can be blinded to the good in others by our own less than bountiful attitudes.

In today's first reading we witness Moses putting Joshua on his guard against his jealousies and bias. Moses turns to Joshua and asks: *Are you jealous on my account?* Moses is certainly not jealous; he is shown to be filled with thanksgiving for the prophetic manifestations to be seen at work in Eldad and Medad. He rejoices in what they are given to live. With a cry of the heart, Moses exclaims his very positive desire: *If only all the people of the Lord were prophets, and the Lord gave His Spirit to them all!*

To leave others free to go about things differently than we do ourselves is important. It is good to be able to rejoice in the good work of all those who labour in the Lord's name – even those whose approach is very different to our own. Such an attitude requires of us a letting go of our tendency to want to control everything and regulate everyone; it means surrendering our tendency to want to attribute all that is good exclusively to ourselves and/or to our own particular group.

After having spoken of the respect they should have for all those who act elsewhere and in other ways than theirs using Christ's name, Jesus went on to evoke with His disciples their need to let go of things they were clinging to; not least to let go of themselves and all forms of self-clinging.

I don't think we can leave aside the shocking element to today's gospel passage and so I want to address for a moment those lines which may take some listeners aback. The images employed by Jesus in today's gospel passage are particularly strong. The Master clearly wants to make a point and even to hammer it home. He tells His disciples that sometimes to avoid death and, indeed, to enhance life, it can be necessary to live radical renouncement – even to the point of undergoing amputation of what is infecting our lives, causing us to sin. However shocking that sounds at first hearing, in fact, the images Jesus employs are images that we know only too well, and appreciate the truth of, from real life situations that could confront any of us. We would all agree that it is sometimes better to lose part of the body through surgery than to lose all of it by leaving an ill untreated. Or, to use another image (perhaps a little less shocking), I am sure we would agree that it can be better sometimes for a boat to lose some of the cargo it is carrying – throwing it overboard – to avoid the vessel capsizing and sinking to the depths of the sea.

The perspective of any loss can make us suffer and frighten us. Who wants to undergo an amputation to live a better life? We would all much prefer to be able to live without losing an infected limb or organ. But sometimes it really is nothing less than *a life or death issue*. On occasions, loss cannot be avoided if life is to be maintained.

The great call of God from the very outset of the Bible is that we choose life: the life in fullness for which God created us.

May the Lord accord us the wisdom we need to discern the way of life He would have us follow for ourselves and the way of life He would have us respect in others.

May the Lord help us to recognise all the diverse ways that we are called to take as we journey life's road, helping us to see how, in the end, all our paths are meant to converge into one: Christ's own way of life, the *Paschal Way* the Lord has traced before us and in which He invites us to follow Him.

Let us have the confidence and trust required to appreciate that any deaths that are required of us along life's way have for purpose to lead us to share more fully in God's own life for all eternity.

Jesus is clear: *Those who lose their life find it*. Loss accepted for Christ is gain. This led Paul to say: *All my losses I endure in this life for Christ, these I count as gain for eternal life with Him*.

Amen!