

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (B) – 26.08.2018

Jos 24:1-2.15-18 / Jn 6:60-69

Words

This past week, the media has been keen to tell us what the Pope should say during his visit in Ireland. He should say this, he should say that... Each word he dares to speak, and even those he does not pronounce, are under great scrutiny.

It is a strange coincidence – or maybe it is God’s Providence – that today the theme of the word is central to the dialogue between Jesus and his followers. In chapter 6 of St John’s Gospel, we see a sharp contrast between two kinds of words.

Firstly we have the disciples who complain. This is a matter of deep concern for Jesus. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus warned the disciples: “Do not complain among yourselves” (Jn 6:43). On Jesus’ lips and in St John’s Gospel the verb “to complain” has a very negative meaning. It brings us back to the time in the desert when the people were complaining against Moses. When St Paul retraces the story of the Israelites, he warns the Christians in Corinth: “Do not complain as some of our ancestors did, and were destroyed by the destroyer” (1Co 10:10).

The verb “to complain” describes an attitude which is highly destructive of relationships in the community because it is based on the fact that things are not said openly. It is like a poison which runs from heart to heart and prevents people from relating with one another in freedom and in truth.

The cause for complaint can be valid, there may be a real problem. However in the biblical context, “to complain” would be better translated by “to murmur against”. When we murmur we do not deal properly with the problem, we do not even look for a solution, once we have located a target, we just want to share our anger, frustration or disappointment with anybody who is ready to give us a willing ear and to confirm us in what we think or feel.

To murmur against somebody imprisons us in a vicious circle of self-righteousness and recrimination. To complain and murmur against is a distorted way to use words. In his letter, St Jude considers the ungodly sinners as “grumblers (murmurers) and malcontents; they are bombastic in speech, flattering people to their own advantage” (v.16).

In the Gospels, there is an irony in the fact that the sterile and poisonous words of the murmurers are aimed at Jesus Christ, the fruitful and life-giving Word of God.

We never find Jesus murmuring against anybody. When he has something to say, he says it to the right person. When there is a problem, he faces it and deals with it. He speaks the truth because he is the truth. His words are the words of eternal life because they heal, save and restore people to life.

Jesus’ words can be challenging because they place us before our responsibilities, they flag up to us what we must change in our lives so that we may grow in Christlikeness. Here is an important point: Jesus’ words are life and they call us to life.

Today in our Church, we have huge problems, we have many reasons to feel angry, frustrated and disappointed; in our families there are many situations which are challenging and unsettling. How do we speak? What are our words for? What do they aim at: love or condemnation, up building or destruction, freedom or imprisonment?

In the Church, are we complaining against others, looking for a scapegoat unto which we can unload all our bad feelings? Will we go on grumbling without making any concrete

decisions or taking any risks? Or are we looking for a way to create a culture of dialogue in our Church, so that it may become a place where we speak freely and respectfully?

The same questions are addressed to our families where too many silences prevent them from bearing witness to God's love. Pope Francis believes that "dialogue is essential for experiencing, expressing and fostering love in marriage and family life" (*Amoris...* n. 136).

While in the Church and in our families we may have developed a culture of secrecy, at the moment in politics we see how words can lose their meaning and become empty by repetition or by distortion. If we wish to foster creative approaches to the challenges which threaten our families and Churches we have to encourage dialogue and use words in a respectful and mature way. Words matter, they help us to be truly human, not in an individualistic way but in making human relationships possible and real.

For St John, the murmur of the followers of Christ is dangerous because it betrays a lack of faith in Christ and also because it is a threat to the unity of the community that we are supposed to form.

St Paul exhorts us to "do all things without murmuring and arguing" and to hold fast to the word of life (Phil 2:14.16). In our Church and in our families, if we want our words to be life-giving, meaningful and truly evangelical, if we want them to bolster our sense of belonging to one another, we have to cling to the Word of life, to Christ himself.

With St Peter may we say: "Lord, you have the words of eternal life, and we believe."