

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

(Isaiah 66:18-21 / Luke 13:22-30)

21.08.2016

Is small always beautiful?

In the seventies a group of economists coined the now famous saying: “Small is beautiful”. From a Christian perspective, the sentence rings true. For us everything begins in a small corner of our hearts and in our Gospel reading Jesus reminds us that we have to remain humble if we want to “enter by the narrow door”.

Yet today the prophet Isaiah tells us that at the same time we are called to belong to a people who is greater than we can imagine and think of. All “nations of every language”, those from “the distant islands”, men and women “from east and west, from north and south” are gathered together to form the holy people of God. We are part of the Body of Christ which encompasses the whole world in time and space. There is nothing small in all this.

Over and over again, the prophet Isaiah calls upon us to “enlarge the site of our tent, and let the curtains of our habitations be stretched out” (54:2). We are invited to broaden our field of vision, to hope bigger and to hold in our hearts a limitless love for all.

We cannot be Christians and be tribal and parochial. We belong to a Church which claims to be Catholic. Let us remember that the word *catholic* means *universal*. Because we embrace the whole world, we cannot be a uniform community, where everybody worships and thinks in the same way. While there is a set of core beliefs and values which cannot be changed, there is a lot of room for diversity. Whether we come from Ireland, Zimbabwe, Japan, Siberia, Mexico, Canada or France, we have different stories and cultures, languages and traditions. In the Acts of the Apostles on the day of Pentecost and in the book of Revelation, we see how all these differences are not erased but reconciled so that they may reflect the beauty of the face of the Risen Lord.

Obviously the problem is not only a question of numbers.

There are some Christian communities which are numerically important and yet very small in their vision of the Body of Christ, narrow-minded and tight-fisted in the way they relate to others outside their group, there are also small Christian communities which display an authentic evangelical open-mindedness and generosity towards all.

The determining factor is not the numerical size of the community but how big our hearts are. Our hearts should be as big as God’s own heart!

We have to ask ourselves regularly whether or not our faith, our hope and our love are selective, discriminatory, fenced in by our fears and our desire to be in control.

To be part of the Body of Christ and to keep our hearts open to its diversity is certainly challenging but most of all it is humbling. We have to be constantly reminded that what we experience of the Church in our local communities, the way we worship and express our faith are only small expressions of what the Church is, we are only one part of the whole Body. Yes we are a necessary part but only one part. Pride for us would have us believe that, on our own, we are able to bear witness to our infinitely multi-faceted God. Pride would have us think that we do not need others from different backgrounds and cultures in order to express adequately and more fully the Christian faith.

Moreover, Jesus clearly warns us that we do not really know who is part of the kingdom of God and who is not. God’s kingdom begins here and now. In the Body of Christ which we form together we are in the Kingdom of God. The conclusion to be drawn is that in

the Church we cannot pick and choose those we like and those we would rather get rid of. As Christians we cannot transform our communities into small cosy huddles of select people.

As we read in the book of Revelation, we are part of “a great multitude that no one can count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (7:9).

The unity of this multitude has always been a concern for Christians. At the moment there are people in our Churches who think that we need to be more orthodox, clearer about who is in and who is out, and more importantly why some must be out and why some allowed in.

We must remember that, in the early days of the Church, pagans recognised Christians by the love they had for one another. The virtue which keeps us all together, despite misunderstandings and legitimate disagreements, is love. We are all members of the same body, held together by love and love alone.

Unity by coercion, forceful uniformity, blind obedience to dogmas and rules have nothing to do with the unity willed by Christ for his Church. Without love all our efforts are pointless.

Our communities and Churches must be “rooted and grounded in love” (Ep 3:17). Love must be the key which allows us to deal in a proper way with all that may threaten the unity of the Body of Christ.

Love is the ligament which connects all the members of the Body and keeps them in the right position.

Pope Francis reminds us that the “Church is a story of love” and that we are part of it (*Meditation*, 24.04.2013). May we not be closed in on ourselves, stifled by petty squabbles. In the Body of Christ, may we find life by giving life, hope by giving hope, love by giving love. (cf. Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated People*, 21.11.2014, II:4)