

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

(Isaiah 50:5-9 / Mark 8:27-35)

16.09.2018

Dialogue

The simple fact that Jesus dialogues with his disciples merits our attention: it should help us to reflect on who God is and how he wants to relate to us as persons and as Churches.

Jesus' two questions and the disciples' answers say something about God's longing to enter into a true dialogue with us. The goal of this dialogue is not just about God having an opportunity to chat with us but for him to reveal to us who he really is. Because God is Trinity, he is dialogue and communion in himself. This shows us how it is only in dialogue with us that God can truly be God for us. Moreover in this process, dialoguing with God, we become and reveal who we truly are.

It is important to notice that the dialogue to which we are called is very personal. While we relate to God as members of the Body of Christ, God relates to each one of us in a quite unique and very personal way.

The dialogue between Jesus and Peter shows us how love, freedom and trust play an important role in our relationship with God. Our dialogue is not, cannot be, always smooth, nice and rosy! Peter's words are a witness to his love for his master and to his freedom of speaking. He says what is in his heart and mind. Love and freedom are necessary ingredients for real relationships.

The fact that Peter was wrong and that Jesus was harsh in his answer should not surprise us. In the Psalms, in the book of Job and throughout the centuries in the lives of many Christians, we find love and freedom, anger and frustration expressed in many different ways.

The important point here is that God expects us to be honest with him, whether our heart is grateful or bitter, joyful or angry. It must be clear to us all that God is more offended by our refusal to speak to him or our attempts to hide things from him, than he is by whatever we may say to him and in whatever way we may express ourselves.

In our relationship with God we have to be careful not to be paralysed by fear of offending him or by a desire to simply keep up appearances – only saying the right things and saying them in the right way. We have to learn to be truthful and simple. The point is not for us to look clean and tidy, nice and polite but to be ourselves.

While St Peter's words to Jesus are sincere and sensible, they are nevertheless wrong. Yet we cannot reproach him his words. St Peter could not understand what was really at stake.

Like St Peter, in our dialogue with God, there are times when we get things wrong, times when we overreact and speak inappropriately, times when like Job we call God to judgement; for us what matters is to strive to remain in dialogue with God. He is our most faithful and patient interlocutor in life.

I said earlier that God is dialogue, and our first conclusion was that we must be in dialogue with him. There is another important conclusion: if our Churches want to be faithful to their mission to bear witness to who God is in the world, then at the heart of our communities there must be dialogue. The dialogical nature of God implies and requires that our Churches be shaped and animated by a dialogue *ad intra* and *ad extra*, within and without, within the Churches themselves and with the world.

The understanding of God's plan is revealed to us by using the technique of dialogue, by questioning and answering. We live by this "dialogue", our knowledge of God is a fruit of this conversation. Blessed Pope Paul VI believed that the Church must change itself into dialogue.

Pope Francis reminds us that "the path of peace begins with dialogue" (Meditation, 24.01.2014). Many of the tensions which threaten our Christian communities at the moment are rooted in our refusal or our fear to really dialogue. The absence of dialogue creates and fosters polarisation and entrenchment and these are a real menace to the life and the mission of our Churches.

In our Churches and in our families, there are still some who find it too challenging to listen to others with humility and patience; and for those in authority, it is still difficult to be reminded that it is only in sincere dialogue with the people that truth can emerge.

At the moment, in the Catholic Church, because leaders and faithful are not used to dialogue, many vent their frustration, anger and impatience on everybody around them, some settle into a cosy silence, others are afraid and refuse to talk.

God in Jesus Christ took the risk of entering into dialogue with us so that we may know the One who is our truth and our peace. If we want peace, true fruitful peace in our Christian communities and in our families we must learn the art of dialogue.

We believe that "if God is a dialogical unity, a being in relation, the human creature made in his image and likeness reflects this constitution" thus we are called to fulfil ourselves in dialogue, in conversation, in encounter (Benedict XVI, Homily, 18.05.2008).

So let us courageously engage in dialogue and let us take the risk to listen to and to journey with one another with patience and respect. If we want to be open to new vistas of understanding, new perspectives and insights, new ways to revitalise our Churches and families then we must not create small ghettos of likeminded people where there is no true dialogue, we must not build walls that hold us apart.

The transformation of our Churches and families into united communities is hard work, and dialogue bears the lion's share of that work. The art of dialogue is an art of love, the specific manner by which we are bound more closely together. As Christians, may we be known by our willingness to dialogue, by our desire to be true artisans of peace and unity.