

Pentecost Sunday (B)
(Ac 2:1-11 / Jn 15:26-27; 16:12-15)
20.05.2018

We live in a world in which there never so many means whereby people could communicate with each other – I might have better said, *supposedly communicate with each other...* And yet, again and again, it is demonstrated for us, through the news we hear and from our own personal experience, just how difficult it is for people to really establish and genuinely maintain channels of communication – channels of communication which remain open and which do what communication is meant to do: serve and build up communion of mind and heart.

We see difficulties with communication, struggles to maintain communion, at all levels of society – at the largest and highest level of international relationships and at the smaller scale of inter-personal relationships (in couples, between family members, etc.) - and also, it has to be said, in and between our Christian communities, which are meant to be spaces wherein God's People can enjoy and draw strength from the communion they share in Christ.

It is bearing in mind the reality of our world and of our personal lives, as well as taking into consideration that of the Church, our different Churches, all called to unity in Christ, that I suggest that we listen to what the story of Pentecost has to say to us.

There are many implications to be drawn forth from the story of the Pentecost event as it is recorded for us in the Acts of the Apostles – and not least when it comes to the whole question of communication and how it should be lived to promote growth in communion between God's People.

The first thing we are told is that when the Holy Spirit came down upon the Apostles they were given an extraordinary gift of speech.

The Spirit's gift of speech made it possible for the Apostles to proclaim the marvels of God in different languages. They were enabled to speak in a way that was comprehensible to each of their hearers. The Gospel proclamation was able to reach people in their differences because of the Spirit's gift of understanding.

Clearly, the Apostles did not all speak in just one manner.

The unfolding of the story of the early Church in the Book of Acts will show us how the Spirit gave the Apostles the wisdom they required to adapt their discourse to different circumstances and situations, without in any way diluting what was essential to the core teachings of the Gospel. We are shown how the Good News could be and was proclaimed in diverse ways, without in any way detracting from the central tenets of the Christian faith.

I believe that what we see illustrated in the Acts of the Apostles is an important message for the Church of all times, in the diverse places where she is called to proclaim the gospel.

The Book of Acts contains an important lesson for us in today's world as it is – the world in which we seek to live by the Gospel and announce the Good News it contains in all the places where we are called to bear witness... not least those areas of our world where there is conflict and therefore a pressing need for reconciliation.

One of the first things that is drawn to our attention through the Pentecost story is the legitimacy – and even the need – for us to respect the differences and diversity which exist between us.

If there was already great diversity among those to whom the Apostles first proclaimed the Good News, there is even greater diversity in the world in which the Church is called to evangelise today.

In today's world it is to be regretted that so many are showing themselves increasingly afraid of and resentful towards plurality. The Spirit of God would have us rejoice in plurality. Again and again through our reading of the New Testament we see how plurality was not only tolerated – begrudgingly conceded to – but actually rejoiced in and seen in a very positive light.

There is a dangerous philosophy abroad at the present time in the world – and this is increasingly the case – that would have people suspicious of differences and diversity. Unfortunately, this same trend is also to be evidenced at work in the Churches. There are those who would advocate that the less differences there are the better this is. They would like to see everyone cast in the same mould, with little or no margin for variation right across the board. This is not healthy. I must insist that not everyone and not everything should be the same. It is not a good thing for all to be uniform, be that in society and/or in the Church. To be uniform means *remaining the same in all cases and at all times; unchanging in form or character*. This is not how life is – it is certainly not how life is meant to be. *To live is to change*, Blessed John Henry Newman reminds us. A living body is constantly undergoing change. Those who hold intransigent opinions block the possibility of conversion in their lives, hindering the free flow of God's grace.

That the Spirit would have us respect differences and rejoice in diversity is hardly surprising because, as St Paul reminds us in Romans 5, the Spirit is *God's love poured into our hearts*. True love is based up the attraction to difference; it always respects those loved in their diversity. Love which ignores or rejects alterity is not true love. When what people call and think of as love is *the same seeking out the same* then this is not really love at all; it is unhealthy self-seeking pursuit. When people who seek out and congregate only *like with like*, then what we see being formed are narcissist couples and uniform groups which amount to nothing others than narcissist collectivities. These gatherings of people are not really communities of love at all.

At this turning point in our world – which is also a time of crisis for the Church/the Churches in so many ways and in so many places – it is surely important for us to learn how to integrate that aspect of Pentecost which points us in the direction of the healthy recognition and appreciation of difference.

We should allow this aspect of Pentecost to speak to us about, and instruct us in regard to, our attitudes in Church and society... and also, it has to be said, at the smaller scale, our attitudes in those little circles of relationships which are part of our lives: as couples, families and communities of life.

In all these places any hint of difference can be perceived by some – the more immature – as a menace. This is not how it should be among us. Differences should not be considered as inevitable causes of tension and friction; healthy differences make for harmony. Instead of being seen as inevitably sources of conflict, differences can be real sources of mutual enrichment and of blessing exchanged.

If we are true to the Spirit's leading and guidance then we will recognise that there are different ways of speaking and different ways of being than our own particular way of speaking and of being.

We will be willing to relate to others who are quite different to us and be in communion with them. We won't only relate to those who think and speak and act as we do.

If we draw our inspiration from the Pentecost event we will use a language that all can understand.

Just to be able to translate word for word what is being said is not to be able to speak another language. To speak fluently in a language other than our mother tongue we have to accept to enter into another mindset. It entails our being able to adapt to another way of thinking and expressing ourselves – the way of the person with whom we are in dialogue.

While being true to ourselves – true to our own thoughts and beliefs – we will want to be respectful of and attentive to the thoughts and beliefs of those with whom we wish to communicate and share our message.

The New Testament shows us in many places how the Apostles were willing to allow themselves to become God's instruments in this way. Their willingness to adapt themselves to those to whom they were sent with the mission to share the Good News led to a rich harvest for God's kingdom of love, unity and peace.

While we would all say that we desire the unity of the Church and long for a just settlement to the disputes which have torn apart so many areas of conflict in the world – including our own land, here in Northern Ireland – we must honestly ask ourselves if we truly will that God's kingdom may come on earth as in heaven.

In practical terms we must ask ourselves and honestly answer questions such as the following: Are we ready to see things differently than the way with which we are familiar?

Will we accept to look at things from another point of view than that from which we have always looked at them?

We really have to accept to take on board the point of view of those with whom we enter into dialogue – otherwise, all we will manage to create is *a dialogue of the deaf*.

We must remember that unity in the Spirit is all about harmony in differences. An accord in harmony is created by different notes being sounded – all of which are in the same key.

The love of God draws all persons and all things together in their diversity.

At Pentecost they spoke not one language, but many languages. This is the richness of the Pentecost event.

Let us ask the Lord this morning to teach us to communicate with others in the different ways open to us, so that we arrive at mutual understanding in the end. Let us ask Him to free us from our fears – all that hinders us from relating to others as we are meant to: with a truly catholic, open spirit. Let us plead with Him to help us perceive others' differences not as a menace or a threat to us, but as a possible gift, a potential source of enrichment.

The call of Pentecost addressed to each one of us is a call to have a heart open to all, a heart ready to embrace every brother and sister in Christ, a heart that wills their wholeness and our own – not only as members of one family, but as one body, one spirit, in Christ.

Amen!