

4th Sunday of Easter (C)
(Acts 13:14,43-52 / John 10:27-30)
12.05.2019

At the end of today's gospel passage we hear Jesus declare: ***The Father and I are one.***

Jesus' mention of His unity/communion with the Father should lead us to think of our own unity/communion in Christ, for, as St Paul reminds us, writing to the Galatians: *you are all one in Christ*. Certainly, we are called to be one. Paul's little phrase *all one in Christ* is taken up by St Benedict in his Rule for Monks. I am always struck by it when I read it. So much so, that if I hadn't have chosen for my abbatial motto the phrase *Ut Congregemur in Unum* (*May all be gathered together in unity... May all be gathered together as one*), I may well have gone with Paul's phrase, as used by Benedict in the Rule, with its reminder to us that *we are all one in Christ*.

The love and communion between the Father and the Son, in the Holy Spirit, creates and makes the Church. St Cyprian reminded his listeners of this in the third century in his teaching. In a homily *On the Lord's Prayer* he declared: *The Church is a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*. Closer to us in time, the Second Vatican Council took this up in its declaration, *On the Church*, quoting directly St Cyprian's little phrase in the Conciliar document, *Lumen Gentium*.

The idea of communion as participation in the life of God is one which is developed with special intensity in John's gospel. It is in the Fourth Gospel that Jesus is presented as having prayed at length for the unity of His disciples – a unity which is clearly to be rooted in their communion with the godhead: *May they be one in us... May they be one, with one another, as You, Father, and I are one*. Chapter 17 of John's gospel, from which these lines are taken, has been called *the kernel of the evangelist's theology of communion*.

I see this very important passage of Sacred Scripture (John 17) to have been prepared – announced, as it were – in the little verse from John 10 which we are considering this morning: *The Father and I are one*.

The verse which we are considering today – taken along with the whole of John 17 – tells us that the communion between Jesus and the Father is not only the model, but also the source and cause of the communion of Christians with Christ and with one another. If in John 10 Jesus declares *The Father and I are one*, in John 17 He will pray: *May those You have given me be one as we are one*. This oneness is spelt out, as the thought broadens, to include all Christians of every generation – our own included: *That they be one even as You Father are in me and I am in You*. That's to say, that we may be one!

It is in John's gospel account that Jesus insists so strongly upon what He calls the New Commandment – namely, that the disciples be one with each other in love: Love one another as I have loved you.

In the Johannine Letters, this *New Commandment* of the Fourth Gospel becomes what the author of the epistles, writing not so long later, already calls an *Old Commandment*, when he reminds his readers that they should be giving flesh to love in their dealings with each other, in the ordinary, concrete, circumstances of their everyday lives.

The whole thrust of John's Letters is that there should be internal cohesion in the community being addressed. Clearly, for John, internal cohesion should be the hallmark for every Christian community. In the words of James McPolin: *Christians are not only drawn into*

communion with God Himself, into the community of love and life between Father and Son. In addition, this communion within the godhead is creative of communion or community among Christians themselves. The core of Johannine mysticism is that communion means human beings integration into community within God, by which his life in human community is radically changed. (...) Communion is to have fellowship with God and in fraternal love. McPolin's point is that life in communion with God and with one another (the two being inseparable) stands the very heart of gospel living and of gospel proclamation.

Words taken from the writings of Pope Emeritus Benedict, which make the same basic point, also spring to mind. He states: *Wherever communion with God – which is communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is destroyed, the root and source of our communion with one another is destroyed. And wherever we do not live communion among ourselves, communion with the Triune God is not alive and true either.*

While all that might sound like fine theological discourse, but far removed from the reality of people's lives, it isn't!

There are practical implications to what is being said here.

What is being declared by these men's theological reflections is a very relevant message for our own day and age, not only in Church, but also in society. We live in what is an increasingly bitterly divided world – one in which in so many places we witness people holding *stand-off* stances in each other's regard. Just think of our present *Talks Process* here in Northern Ireland! Just think of all the various fragmentations and conflicts between various groups in society and between whole nations. The present division in the UK, the desire of so many to cut themselves off from the wider European community; so many nations wanting to go it alone. Are our conflicts, dissensions and rivalries not so many manifestations of the breakdown of people's communion with God?

And, let's face it, even our Churches, which are supposed to have something to say to this world about unity, are not that well placed to comment on the subject of divisions, given that all too often, they also contribute to disunity by holding themselves in stand-off positions in each other's regard.

Communion is not just a theological term. While it certainly is something that Christians aspire to with an ardent longing; while it is the essence of the Good News; while it is something which we are given to experience already in Church life when it functions properly (which admittedly is not all the time!)... communion is actually something which all people long for – whether or not they are of explicit Christian faith.

Communion/community is the remedy given to us by the Lord to help us overcome that most painful and distressing of ills which is plaguing today's world – one from which so many, even some of us here, are suffering: loneliness/isolation.

We should not be complacent around the ravaging effects of these ills. They are a real threat to society, including our Christian communities and our personal lives. Specialists tell us that even physical ills can be traced back to loneliness.

In contrast to the malaise they cause, the experience of communion is a precious gift that makes people feel welcomed and loved by God and also accepted by others. Communion is experienced when we are brought and held together in communities of care and friendship, wherein mutual consideration is the order of the day.

(In passing, it should be said that John's gospel which stresses the importance of communion is also the gospel which speaks most of friendship.)

All this to say that as Christian communities we must seek to promote *a spirituality of communion* which is suitable for the present time. In the words of St John-Paul II written to mark our entry into the present millennium, it befalls us *to make the Church the home and school of communion. That is the great challenge facing us in this millennium if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings. As Christians we are called to be witnesses and artisans of that plan of communion which stands at the centre of history according to God.*

Let's get concrete and see how we can put the ideal spelt out in those words into practice. We will do that if we no longer live in self-obsessed ways; if and when we no longer only have a *me first/my particular group first, and/or my country first* attitude. The challenge presented to us by an authentic spirituality of communion is to think of others as those who are part of me – part of us. Vatican II reminded us that as Christians we should strive to share the joys and sufferings of our brothers and sisters in humanity; that we should sense their desires and attend to their needs and offer them true and profound friendship.

To return to the thought of John-Paul II: *The spirituality of communion* (to which we are called) *implies the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and to prize it as a gift from God.* It implies that we know *how to make room for others, sharing each other's burdens.* Unless we actually do that in all sorts of practical ways our Christian discourse will remain just empty words!

If we are at all attentive to the signs of the times we will have grasped that the future can no longer be faced in isolation... and yet more and more people, including certain world leaders and unfortunately even Church people, are advocating isolationist policies. Isolationism is destroying the very fabric of society, the world's nations, our Churches, our communities, our families...

The Church is called to be counter-cultural and therefore to proclaim that we must learn to love the others' communities – including the others' religious families – as much as our own. The whole of humanity's joys and sorrows, concerns and successes, belong to everyone. They can and should be shared by everyone.

Pope Francis is forever advocating such a vision. He has clearly grasped, and is intent upon promoting, the Church to be the sacrament of communion. This vision is central to the ecclesiology formulated at the Second Vatican Council.

(Much of the opposition Pope Francis is encountering in the Church today is precisely rooted in a resistance to his broad, conciliar, vision of communion.)

The present pope constantly reminds us that *the whole world awaits us*. He stresses that *men and women who are without hope await us*. He insists that *families in difficulty await us*. He reminds us that *abandoned children await us, young people without a future await us, the elderly, the sick, the abandoned... all sorts of suffering people await us*. He also draws to our attention that *those who are rich in the world's goods, but impoverished within, also await us; men and women who are looking for a glimpse of God's goodness – albeit unwittingly – await us*. For this reason he addresses the following words to us. Here I quote Pope Francis directly: *Don't be closed in on yourselves; don't be stifled by petty squabbles; don't remain a hostage of your own problems*. He challenges us to reflect upon what he calls *the mystique of living together in love*, inviting us to ask ourselves how we relate to persons of different cultures than our own. His premise is that true communion within our own communities will lead us to genuine encounters with people beyond them.

In today's first reading we heard: *I have made you a light for the nations, so that my saving word may reach to the ends of the earth.* The author of the Acts of the Apostles goes on to say: *It made the pagans happy to hear this... and they thanked the Lord for this message.* Those words, written by Luke, call us to genuine encounter beyond our own little comfort zones.

There is a word in today's gospel which is very important in John's writings and to which I want to draw attention for just a moment before concluding this reflection. It is the verb *to know*.

Knowledge belongs to the essence of communion which we have been considering up until now.

We find the idea of knowledge developed in both the short section from John 10 read in today's gospel and in chapter 17 of the Fourth gospel account. *I know mine and mine know me.* (John 10:14) *This is eternal life; that they know You, the only True God, and the One (Jesus) whom You have sent.* (John 17:7)

To know someone in the Hebrew bible means to have a deep personal relationship of love with the person; it is to have a real experience of the person concerned; it is to be in communion with that person.

In a relationship of mutual knowledge the two become one, in a certain sense. The communion in love which exists between the persons of the Trinity is presented over and over again by John in this specific light: as *loving knowledge*.

May such *loving knowledge* be apparent in our lives and may it be an attractive force – one that leads others to want to know and love the God with whom we live in relationship. The example of love in our lives should be our first proclamation of the gospel – even before we ever open our mouths to speak.

Amen!