

5th Sunday of Easter (B)
(Acts 9:26-31 / John 15:1-8)
02.05.2021
To remain

For St John, if we want to fulfil our mission, if we want to be genuine disciples, we have no choice but “to remain”... if I stop the sentence at that point, many will ask: “to remain where? To remain in what?”

Before answering these questions, it is important to say that St John uses the verb “to remain” 8 times in the 8 verses we just heard today. The verb has a very precise meaning in the Bible. In the Old Testament it is about permanence and steadfastness. It is first a mark of God, as contrasted with the transitory and unstable aspect of humanity. In the words of the prophet Daniel: “God is the living God, enduring for ever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end.” (6:26) and according to the prophet Isaiah: “The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever.” (40:8) In the New Testament, for St John in particular, the Greek verb translated in English by “to remain” expresses the permanency of relationship between the Father and the Son and between the Son and the disciples.

Ultimately “to remain” sums up what discipleship is about: like God, we are called to be rooted, intentional and perseverant beings.

These three qualities, “rootedness, intentionality and perseverance”, are not natural to us. Unlike God, because we have to deal with life, weaknesses, limitations and sins, every day, we need to constantly renew our decision to remain in the Son.

The fact that the relationship between Jesus and his disciples is patterned on the Father-Son relationship implies that there is nothing static in the verb “to remain”. We are not talking here about being stuck in the mud but about living in a dynamic relationship of love. Indeed love, in the Person of the Holy Spirit, unites the Father and the Son and it unites the disciples with the Trinity and with one another.

As Jesus says: “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (Jn 17:23)

Concretely what does it mean for us to remain in God or, as Jesus repeats many times in John’s Gospel, to remain in him?

The answer is given by Jesus himself when he says: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; remain in my love” (Jn 15:9). And in case the first community would be slow to understand, St John declared: “God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God, and God remains in them” (1Jn 4:16).

So for us to remain in God is a radical call to love God, our neighbours and ourselves intentionally and with perseverance. “If we love one another, God remains in us” (1Jn 4:12) and we remain in him.

This year, as we commemorate the 7th centenary of the death of Dante, it is appropriate to remember that in his description of hell, he pictures the devil seated on a throne of ice, in frozen and loveless isolation (cf. *Inferno* XXXIV, 28-29).

In Christianity there should be no room for loveless isolation. The desire to remain in love spurs us on, as Pope Francis reminds us, to “overcome suspicion, habitual mistrust, fear of losing our privacy” and “to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their

physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 88).

As disciples of Christ because we want to remain in God who is love we should never be tired “of our decision to live in fraternity” (*Id*, n. 91), we should “not allow ourselves to be robbed of community” (*Id*, n. 92) by our fears, pride, desire to be in control and to be self-reliant.

A month ago, on two different occasions, Cardinal Cantalamessa (02.04.2021) and Cardinal Parolin (05.04.2021) have drawn our attention to the divisions and polarisation which threaten the unity of the Catholic Church.

Their concern for the unity of the Church, a concern which should be ours, does not aim at creating a cosy and exclusive club and a sect of self-absorbed people. We will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (cf. Mt 5:13.14) only if we are united in love, if our Christian communities are parables of communion. Only “love makes us a ‘we’ which transcends our divisions and makes us one” (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 18).

At a personal and institutional levels, in the way we relate to one another in the Church and to our brothers and sisters in society, beyond the differences of gender, sexual orientation, race, religion and political opinions, we are called to remain in God or, as St Paul says, to be “rooted and grounded in love” (Eph 3:17).

The National Synod initiated by the Catholic Church in Ireland is an opportunity for us to build ourselves up anew as a community of love. It is an opportunity to check whether we remain in God or whether we have drifted away in the loveless land of selfishness, clericalism, legalism and individualism.

Allow me to conclude with the words taken from a letter that St Catherine of Siena addressed to the Prior of the Olivetan Monastery just outside Siena in 1377: “Strengthen and encourage one another, binding yourselves together in the bond of love. Remain in the holy love of God.” (*Letter 31*, p. 146)