

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (C)  
(Acts 15:1-2.22-29 / John 14:23-29)  
22.05.2022  
*Essential and non-essential*

According to the passage from the Acts that we listened to this morning, at one stage, the first Christian community went through a period a crisis. This left some of its members feeling disturbed and unsettled.

The crisis happened because some declared: “Unless you have yourselves circumcised in the tradition of Moses you cannot be saved.” Their declaration concerned one element which was at the heart of the Jewish faith: circumcision. The apostles tackled the question head-on and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they reached the conclusion that there was no need to saddle the disciples with any burden beyond what they considered to be essential: to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals and from fornication.

As we are experiencing a period of societal and religious crisis, this episode is very relevant to us today. There are many, in all our Churches who are tempted to reduce faith to simplistic and narrow statements similar to the one that troubled the first Christians. Recently, as I was talking to a group, I was told by one young Catholic man that we were not a real Catholic community because we do not have adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in our church regularly. In another group, I was told by a Protestant man that I was not a Christian because we do not use the King James Version of the Bible. And my last example, concerns an Orthodox priest who, while I was talking to a group of his parishioners, accused me to be an idolater because in the Catholic Church we have made an idol of Mary.

The polarisation and tensions which are at work in our Churches, the tendency to cling to certitudes are the result of our fears, our sense of insecurity and our desire to be in control.

At least from our reading of the Acts of the Apostles, we see that this is not something entirely new. The present crisis is not the first to occur and it will certainly not be the last either. So there is no need to panic, to build walls, to withdraw into ghettos, to excommunicate like mad in order to secure the cohesion of the group.

It seems to me that the first thing we must do is, to follow the example of the apostles in today’s first reading, to take the time to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Church in order to be able to discern what is really essential and what is not. We have to distinguish what we must fight for and what we must simply let go. What is interesting in our reading from the Acts is that the apostles dismissed as non-essential something which was considered by many as essential – circumcision – and that the same apostles imposed upon people elements that are no longer relevant – abstinence from food sacrificed to idols, from blood and from the meat of strangled animals. The lesson is that we must be careful not to waste time and energy over things which may have been important at one stage in the past, things which are not necessarily bad, but which are no longer either essential or relevant. In a time of crisis, we must focus our attention on the real issues, we must concentrate on what really matters, on what the Lord wants us to be and do today.

The Synod of Bishops in Rome and the Irish Synodal Pathway are an opportunity for us to listen to the Spirit and to discern together the signs of the times. What is at stake here is nothing less than our fidelity to God’s Word which is ever new and always relevant, because

it concerns nothing less than our ability to bear witness to God who is present and active here and now.

The work of attentive listening and discernment that we all have to accomplish in our lives is also the way for us to foster real communion in our Christian communities.

In our text from the Acts, we are told that disagreements arose in the community. If it were only a matter of disagreements, the situation would not be so worrying. The fact is that the Greek word which is used has a violent and divisive connotation. Elsewhere in the Acts, it is translated: turning the world upside down (17:6), riot (19:40), revolt (21:38).

The crisis we assist at in Acts was initiated by men who made a forceful and judgemental statement against the members of the first Christian community in Antioch. These Christians had a very deep desire to live in the peace that the Risen Lord had given them. By words and deeds, they wanted to preach “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (Ac 10:36).

The whole process of listening, dialogue and discernment, promoted by the apostles, which is at the heart of the present Synodal Path proposed to us is a trademark of the Church, it is the guarantee of true peace in all our communities. We must help one another discern what the filters are that function in our hearts and minds, which prevent us from dialoguing with others and which foster divisions and which lead to mutual exclusion.

Because of our fears we may be tempted to adopt polarising patterns of speech, which create black and white oppositions, which reduce complex questions to simplistic issues. Since we want to make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3) in our communities and since we are called to “be artisans of peace” (Mt 5:9) in the world, we need to dialogue with one another humbly, to listen to one another respectfully and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to “discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rm 12:2).