

6th Sunday of Easter (A)
(Acts 8:5-8.14-17 / John 14:15-21)
14.05.2023
Unity, Miracles & Joy

In our 1st reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we are told that the people from Samaria were united in listening to Philip's proclamation of the Good News, that miracles were performed and that there was great rejoicing in the town as a consequence of Philip's ministry.

It may be important to say that what happened in an unnamed town in the 1st century of the Christian era is not read to us for the sake of recalling the exploits and achievements of a glorious past. What happened 2000 years ago is relevant to us because it should inform and inspire the way we live as Christian communities today.

The first point on which St Luke insists in the Acts of the Apostles and which we find in the verses read this morning is unity: the fact that the people listened to Philip with one heart and in one accord.

At the moment, all our Churches are struggling with inner divisions. The fast pace of changes in society and the fears it generates, the lack of trust in all institutions, the unhealthy alliance between politics and religion, all tend to polarise and divide us. The Orthodox Churches are in crisis over the war in Ukraine, the Anglican Communion is in crisis over sexuality issues and the Catholic Church is in crisis over the abuse scandals and, in the States particularly, over the abortion debate.

Closer to us, here in Northern Ireland, we are still dealing with bigotry born out of pride, fears, ignorance and political manipulation. Using St Peter's words, we have to acknowledge that "like a roaring lion our adversary the devil prowls around" (1P 5:8) sowing seeds of hate, distrust and division.

Unity and reconciliation are not secondary aspects of our faith. It is at the heart of what we celebrate at Easter. Christ died and rose from the dead so that, according to St Paul, "he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross." (Eph 2:15-16)

Christ came to reconcile us with God and with one another.

Everything in our hearts and in our decisions that does not foster unity and reconciliation is not from God and prevents the victory of Christ from bearing its fruits in our lives and in the world. We have to be careful, either we are "ambassadors for Christ" (2Co 5:20) and his message of unity or we are agents of division.

The miracles which Philip was able to accomplish in the Samaritan town were the visible signs of the Spirit's active presence made manifest in the words and the actions of the apostle. The same Spirit of healing is at work today and so miracles should and could happen in our midst. I am not thinking first and foremost of physical healing, which may happen but which is certainly quite exceptional. It seems to me that we should focus our attention on all the other forms of miracle that the Lord wants us to accomplish in our daily lives.

We might think of all those relationships in our lives which are marked by bitterness and resentment, by misunderstanding and pride. Are we ready and willing to use the healing remedies of forgiveness and humility, of truthful dialogue and letting go?

We might think also of all our brothers and sisters who are crushed by guilt and shame, because of our heart-heartedness and our judgemental attitudes. We can accomplish miracles and free them from the prison where we hold them captive. In these cases, are we ready and willing to use the healing remedies of love, patience and hope?

There are also those who suffer because of politicians who do not assume their responsibilities, do not do their job, and governments who do not care for the common good, particularly in regard to migrants, or those who are marginalised and the many who meet with financial difficulties. Here again healing miracles could happen. The miracle here would be for us to be responsible in the way we vote, in the way we live in society and whether or not we want to be attentive to the needs of others.

Would it not be a great miracle if we were less self-centred and self-reliant, more generous and compassionate?

The joy of the people of Samaria was not that of bystanders or mere spectators. They were not full of joy because the show of miracles was entertaining. Their joy came from the fact that they witnessed the victory of Christ over sin and death and that they were invited to be part of this victory. In welcoming the Good News they became co-victors with Christ. Their joy was the joy of life, the joy of being fully alive and truly life-giving. It was the joy of knowing that they were no longer stuck in the mud of a blind destiny and because, thanks to God who is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all they were asking or imagining (cf. Eph 3:20), they were able to accomplish miracles and defeat the power of death in their lives and in the world.

The story of what Philip did in a small corner of the middle-east teaches us and challenges us a lot. We might ask: what about our lives here in Northern Ireland as believers called to witness to the Good News, the same Good News that was proclaimed by Philip?

What about our mission to be ministers of unity and reconciliation in our families, communities and society? What about our commitment to be docile to the promptings of the Spirit within us to bring about the small miracles that we can and should accomplish for the healing of the wounds which prevent ourselves, so many of our brothers and sisters and our institutions from reflecting something of the beauty and the “radiance of the glory of God” (He 1:3).

As we journey towards the feast of Pentecost, may we call for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit of conversion so that “transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Rm 12:2) we may all “rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.” (1P 1:8)