

26th Sunday of the Year (B)
(Numbers 11:25-29 / Mark 9:38-43.45.47-48)
29.09.2024
Us vs Them

For a few years now, in our local Churches, we have seen polarisation become more and more prevalent. Polarisation means that we think more and more in terms of us vs them. Debates have supplanted a culture of dialogue, to foster sameness seems more important than to work for the reconciliation of differences, the concept of the ghetto mentality seems to prevailed over the idea of building up communities. And so Jesus' words heard in our Gospel reading seem to be very appropriate to our present situation in the Catholic Church.

We may ask ourselves if many, in our Churches, do not disagree with Jesus when he says: "Anyone who is not against us is for us" and would rather say: "Anyone who does not agree with us is against us."

Without being too pessimistic, we must be honest about the challenges we face at the moment in order to be able to move beyond them and better fulfil our mission in the world.

The unity that God wants for the Church, and ultimately for the whole world, cannot be the result of a policy of selection and exclusion on our part. It has to be accomplished by the Spirit whose mission is to conform us to the Trinity: three Persons who are different but united in love.

At a time when we are quick to feel threatened, it is absolutely vital for us to remember that it is not because people disagree with us that they are completely wrong, ill-intentioned or morally bankrupt; it is necessary for us to keep in mind that the claim to know God and to be disciples of Jesus Christ does not imply that we have the monopoly of goodness and wisdom. More radically, we must acknowledge that we do not own God in such a way that he is unable to work in and through women and men who are not part of our Church or religion.

The God revealed in Jesus Christ is not limited by our small cultural, denominational and national boundaries.

In a radical way St Paul wrote: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:28) So in the new community of Jesus' disciples there is no privilege of insider over outsider, of owner over owned and of male over female; race, wealth and gender are no longer exclusively defining features for the new people of God because all of us are one in Christ Jesus.

The second aspect on which Jesus insists is about the way we should deal with sin in our lives. Here it seems to me that the striking thing is not that Jesus expects us to literally amputate ourselves should we sin with a hand, a foot or an eye. What seems particularly relevant for us is that Jesus' words are a call for each one of us to examine our own lives not that of others. Jesus did not say: "If you notice that the hand of your brother or sister causes him or her to sin, cut it off."

There are certainly times and circumstances when it is appropriate for us to help brothers and sisters to notice a sinful word or behaviour on their part and draw it to their attention. Yet today the emphasis is on the need for each one of us, very personally and sometimes with the help of somebody else, to discern where the trigger to sin lurks in our

lives, what needs to be purified and healed, cared for and forgiven in order to prevent the wound from festering. Behind every sin there is a wound, so we have the duty to be serious about our spiritual and moral lives, to check that what hurts us does not poison the whole body.

Jesus' words aim at highlighting the fact that if sin is not dealt with properly, it spreads everywhere and impacts more than on our personal lives. Dostoevsky believed that: "In sinning, each one sins against all. There is no isolated sin."

This should not paralyse us but rather increase in us the awareness that none of us is an island and that we have to deal with the sin which lies in our hearts for our own good and the good of all.

So it is clear that if we want to live our lives fully and fruitfully we must move from "us vs them" mentality into an "us together" way of thinking. This togetherness, this communion is and will be challenged by fears, pride, disagreements, mistakes and misunderstandings; it will be threatened by the evil one who will try to lead us into sin and foster everything that divides, rejects and excludes what is around us.

Joshua, in the book of Numbers, and John, in the Gospel reading we heard today, were certainly well-intentioned in their desire to stop those who did not appear to belong to their group. Yet they were wrong. Their God was too small. He was a God who fitted into a tiny niche in their hearts, a petty God.

Let us not be too hard with Joshua and John, and let us be honest, their mistake can be ours sometimes.

What we need at the moment in our Christian communities is not more physical barriers or inner walls which would isolate and alienate us from one another.

The path we must walk together is the one initiated by the Synod on Synodality: it is about fostering a culture of respectful listening and serious discernment; it is also about changing the way we approach the questions of our contemporaries so that we may answer them, "speaking the truth in love." (Eph 4:15)